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A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



January 2011
Commemorating Sri Ramakrishna's
175th Birth Anniversary

Vol. 116, No. 1

THE ROAD TO WISDOM

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON SRI RAMAKRISHNA



TIT was while reforms of various kinds were being inaugurated in India that a child was born of poor Brahmin parents on the eighteenth of February, 1836, in one of the remote villages of Bengal. The father and mother were very orthodox people. The life of a really orthodox Brahmin is one of continuous renunciation. ... Now it is written in our books that a man should always be charitable even to the extreme. If a man starves himself to death to help another man, to save that man's life, it is all right; it is even held that a man ought to do that. And it is expected of a Brahmin to carry this idea out to the very extreme. ...

The idea of sex and the idea of money were the two things, he thought, that prevented him from seeing the Mother. This whole universe is the manifestation of the Mother, and She lives in every woman's body. "Every woman represents the Mother; how can I think of woman in mere sex relation?" That was the idea: Every woman was his Mother, he must bring himself to the state when he would see nothing but Mother in every woman. And he carried it out in his life. ...

People came by thousands to see this wonderful man who spoke in a patois, every word of which was forceful and instinct with light. For it is not what is spoken, much less the language in which it is spoken, but it is

the personality of the speaker which dwells in everything he says that carries weight. Every one of us feels this at times. We hear most splendid orations, most wonderfully reasoned - out discourses, and we go home and forget them all. At other times we hear a few words in the simplest of language, and they enter into our lives, become part and parcel of ourselves and produce lasting results. The words of a man who can put his personality into them take effect, but he must have tremendous personality. All teaching implies giving and taking, the teacher gives and the taught receives, but the one must have something to give, and the other must be open to receive. ...

The second idea that I learnt from my Master, and which is perhaps the most vital, is the wonderful truth that the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion. That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one.

From *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*,
4.160.



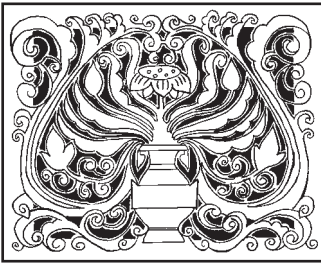
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Vol. 116, No. 1
January 2011

Contents



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Traditional Wisdom	1
<i>Editorial: Sri Ramakrishna: Abode of all Felicity</i>	5
Sri Ramakrishna: A Unique Phenomenon	7
Swami Smaranananda	

The Person and His Message

Understanding Sri Ramakrishna	12
Swami Prabhananda	
The Magnitude of Ramakrishna's Life and Message	20
Swami Chetanananda	
Sri Ramakrishna:	28
The 'New Man' of the Age	
Swami Bhajanananda	
Understanding Bhāvamukha:	37
Sri Ramakrishna's Unique State of Consciousness	
Swami Atmapriyananda	
Sri Ramakrishna on Himself	44
Compiled by Mohit Ranjan Das	
Sri Ramakrishna in Contemporary Eyes	53
Swami Vimalatmananda	
Sri Ramakrishna: A Wonderful Man	64
Swami Nirantarananda	

Traditions and Influences

- 76 **Dashavatara and Ramakrishna**
Swami Brahmeshananda
- 86 **Kashmir Shaivism in the Light of
Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings**
Swami Tadananda
- 92 **Re-visioning Sri Ramakrishna Tantra**
Dr M Sivaramkrishna
- 104 **Influence of Sri Ramakrishna
on the Hindi Poet Nirala**
Prof. Awadesh Pradhan
- 109 **Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Chinmoy**
Dr Kusumita P Pedersen
- 115 **The Natural Way to Intimacy with God:
Sri Ramakrishna's Gift**
Dr Rita D Sherma
- 121 **The Practice of Modern Yoga:
Sri Ramakrishna's Four Contributions**
Dr Christopher Key Chapple

Concourse of Religions

- Sri Ramakrishna and
Sanatana Dharma** 132
Morari Bapu
- Bhagavan Mahavira
and Ramakrishna** 135
Prof. Manjula Bordia
- Coming for the Meditation but
Staying for the Bowing** 142
Rev. Heng Sure
- Sri Ramakrishna's Legacy from
Buddhist and Jain Perspectives** 149
Prof. Padmanabh S Jaini
- In the Theatre of Bhakti:
One Dance, Two Dancers** 157
Acharya Srivatsa Goswami
- Sri Ramakrishna and Sikhism** 167
Dr Vanita
- Sri Ramakrishna's Sufi Sadhana** 171
Maulana Mubarak Karim Jawahar
- Ramakrishna, Christ, and
Divine Incarnation** 177
Father Paul Dupuis
- Sri Ramakrishna and
the Experiential Basis of
Vedantic Religious Pluralism** 182
Dr Jeffery D Long

Kaleidoscopic Perspectives

- 190 **Finding the Explanation:
Interpreting Sri Ramakrishna**
Pravrajika Vrajaprana
- 203 **Renewing the Study of Ramakrishna:
A Proposal**
Fr Francis X Clooney
- 209 **Philip Glass on Sri Ramakrishna**
Dr Kusumita P Pedersen
- 213 **Spiritual Mother-lines in
India and the West**
Dr Carol Lee Flinders
- 219 **Sri Ramakrishna's Parables for
Soft Skills Development**
Dr Sumita Roy



Reviews 224

Reports 229

TO OUR READERS

As *Prabuddha Bharata* enters its hundred and sixteenth year, it glances at the long and hard road it has traversed for over a century. The numerous brilliant minds and sacrifices that have helped it travel smoothly flits just behind the glance. This journal had wisely avoided the beaten and easy track that slowly kills many a publication, carving in the process a unique identity for itself in religious journalism. All along *Prabuddha Bharata* has been fortified by the strength and vision that Swami Vivekananda has infused into it, a strength that will not peter out for centuries to come. But this is no reason for complacency, as the future will bring even greater challenges. This, in short, is the glorious inheritance of *Prabuddha Bharata*, which thanks to technology is now available in DVD format.

We wish to thank all of you—readers, subscribers, contributors, reviewers, publishers, ad-

vertisers, patrons, and well-wishers—who have been actively sharing the journal's travel and helping to actualize Swamiji's words: 'Awakener, ever forward! Speak thy stirring words.'

For the last six months we have been slowly putting together this January 2011 volume to commemorate the 175th birth anniversary of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, whose advent heralded a momentous change for humanity. This imperceptible change started by energizing humanity's insatiable endeavour to know itself and the world around. It has thus resulted in the efflorescence of religion, science, philosophy, art, and other disciplines.

What better way to greet a new year can there be than read about, think of, and contemplate on Sri Ramakrishna? We invite you to encourage your friends, colleagues, neighbours, and family to read and subscribe to *Prabuddha Bharata*.

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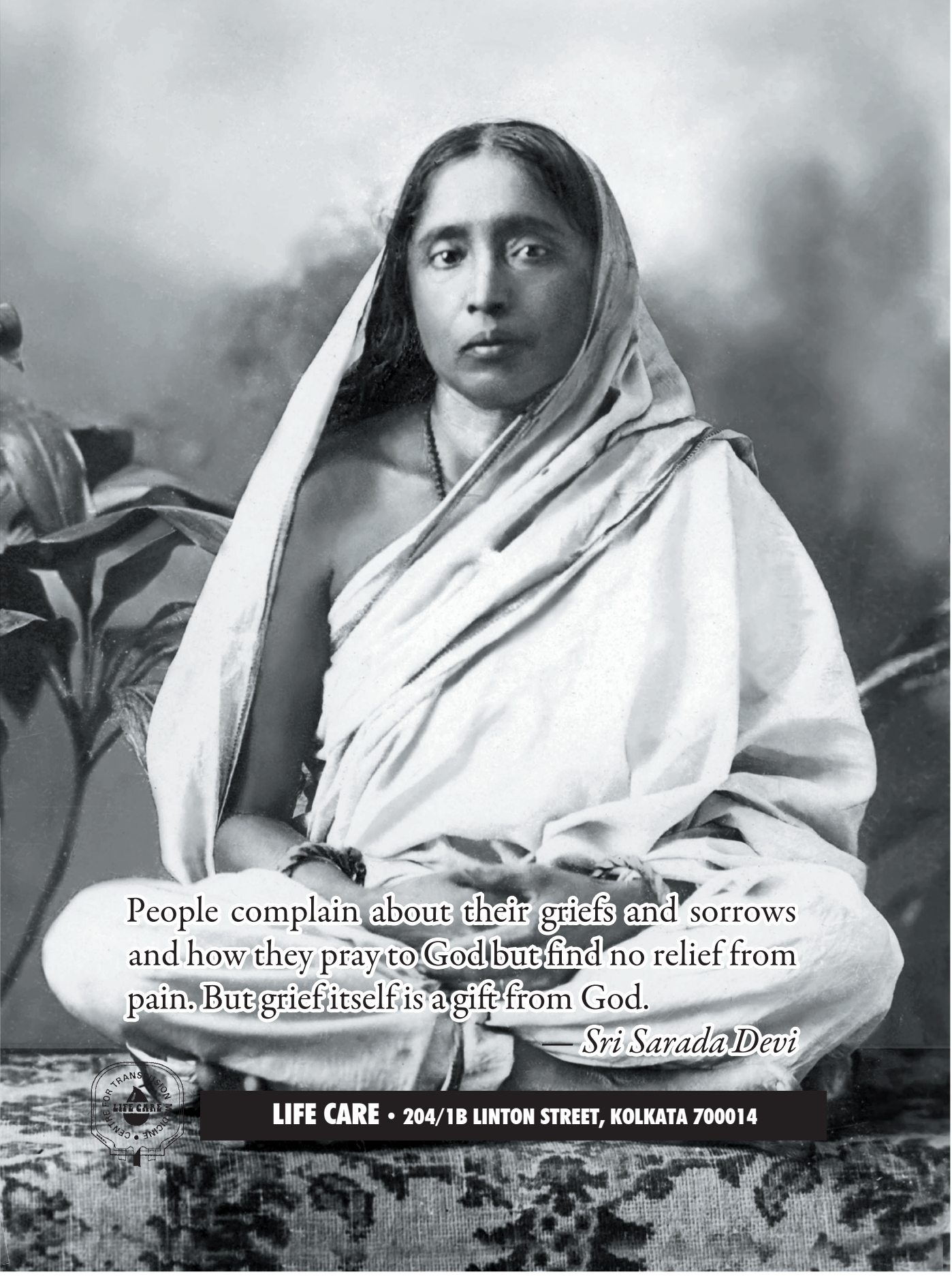
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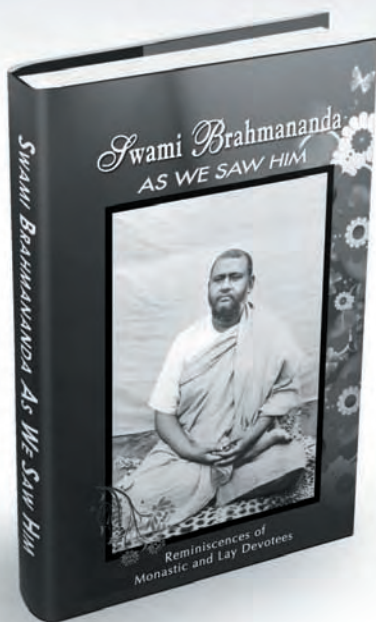
People complain about their griefs and sorrows
and how they pray to God but find no relief from
pain. But grief itself is a gift from God.

— *Sri Sarada Devi*



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We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran.

Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best.

— Swami Vivekananda



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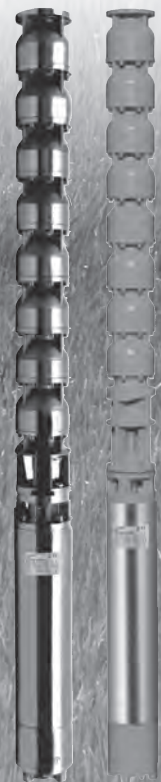
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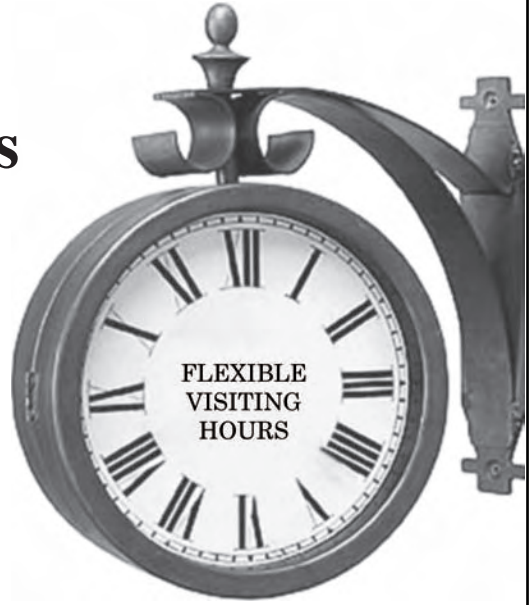
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No one ever succeeded in keeping
society in good humour and at the
same time did great works.

—*Swami Vivekananda*—



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REGENERATE RURAL INDIA

Swami Vireswarananda

(Tenth President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission)

“If we want to regenerate India, we must work for the masses. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed and well cared for”, so said Swami Vivekananda. The vast majority of these people live in villages and very little has been done so far for improving their condition. The masses have to be raised by integrated development of the villages.

The poverty of the backward classes is appalling. They perhaps take some food today, a morsel of food not sufficient to fill their stomach, but they are not sure that tomorrow they will get another morsel. That is their condition. And there are many other problems connected with this that should concern us like hygiene, health, drinking water, economic development. All these and so many other pressing problems are there to be solved.

Try to improve the living conditions of the poor, their environment, to begin with. Of course, they may not be very clean; they may be dirty. Try to improve their lot. I sincerely believe it can be done. Try to teach them how to improve themselves and be clean and neat. You can do that by means of movie pictures.

You can show them movie pictures on culture, hygiene and health, so that they can imbibe all these ideas. It is quite possible.

There are various shortcomings in our society which has to be cleansed - ethically, morally and in every other way—if we are to become a great nation again. In this field I think ladies can probably do much better than men. They can organize against all these social evils and problems, such as the practice of untouchability, the dowry system, care of orphans and so on. Remove all these various meaningless handicaps retarding the progress of our society, particularly untouchability. It is meaningless. We talk of Vedanta and then say, ‘Don’t enter into my house; I won’t drink water from your hand.’ What is all this? Sheer madness. Nonsense.

I appeal to all to take up this work for the poor and downtrodden which will benefit them and the country. In this connection, I would like to remind all of the words of the Lord Himself in the Gita, “*Na hi kalyankritakshchid durgati tat gachhati*”, The doer of good, my child, never comes by evil.” This is the promise the Lord has held out to us and so we can be sure of it. May He inspire and guide us all in this urgent work for the people of rural India is my prayer to Him.

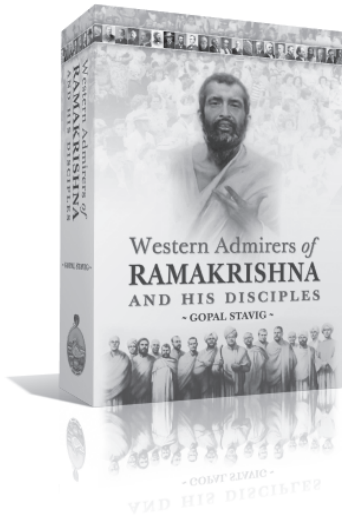
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~GOPAL STAVIG~



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Sri Ramakrishna Panchavimshika

January 2011
Vol. 116, No. 1

श्रीरामकृष्णपञ्चविंशिका (Twenty-five Verses on Sri Ramakrishna)

आदिदेवो हि जातो वै रामकृष्णो जगद्गुरुः ।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय कलौ स धृतविग्रहः ॥१॥

Narayana was born in human form as Sri Ramakrishna, the world-teacher, in this dark age for establishing the path of dharma.

कामारपुष्करे ग्रामे क्षुदिरामतनुद्भवः ।
अवतीर्य जगत्राणं चक्रे विस्मयकारकम् ॥२॥

Having descended in the village Kamarpukur as the son of Kshudiram, he did marvellous acts for the redemption of the world.

सूनुस्तेऽहं बुभूषामि लिप्सुः सेवान्ते सत्वरम् ।
जगदे क्षुदिरामोऽसौ गयाधाम्नि गदाभृता ॥३॥

In holy Gaya Vishnu, the wielder of mace, said to Kshudiram:
'I wish to soon be born as your son and favour you by accepting your service.'

दरिद्रो न समर्थोऽस्मि सेवायान्ते जगत्पते ।
क्षुदिराम उवाचैतत् करुणकरुणं हरिम् ॥४॥

Kshudiram regretfully said to Sri Hari:
'I am poor and unable to serve you, O Lord of the universe.'

कथमपि भवेत् सा तु नात्र कार्या विचारणा ।
प्रत्युवाच त्रिलोकेश आश्वस्य ब्राह्मणोत्तमम् ॥५॥

The Lord of the three universes, however, replied assuring him:
'Somehow that (service) will be done. Cease worrying yourself about it.'

आसीच्चन्द्रमणिर्माता रामकृष्णस्य पालिका ।
जगदाधारभूतस्य निराधारस्य धारिका ॥६॥

Sri Ramakrishna's mother Chandramani brought him up and was his refuge, (though he) was the unsustained sustainer of this world.

तामाश्रित्य जगद्भर्ता बालभावसमन्वितः ।
निश्चकारातुलां लीलां मोहयन् सर्वमानवान् ॥७॥

Held by her (Chandramani), Sri Ramakrishna, the protector of the universe, of childlike manners, played his divine sport enchanting everyone.

दिव्यकान्तिकथाकण्ठैर्गीताभिनयवैभवेः ।
ईश्वरीयप्रसङ्गानामवतारैः सुविस्तरैः ॥८॥
स्वतः समाधियोगेन दिव्यभावप्रकाशिना ।
नन्दयन् स्वगृहग्रामजनान् शैशवमक्रमत् ॥९॥

Gadadhar (Sri Ramakrishna) passed his childhood enacting excellent and detailed dramas related to divine topics. The retelling of (Puranic) stories through his melodious songs, divine lustre, and deep absorption revealed his divine nature and added delight to the people of his home and village.

ततो दिवं गते ताते ज्येष्ठाग्रजानुगामिना ।
शिश्निये याजनावृत्तिः कलिकातां गतेन वै ॥१०॥

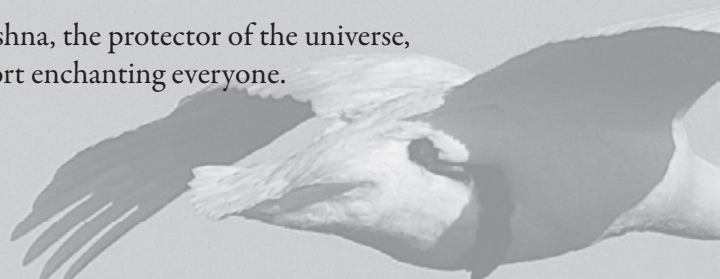
After the death of his father, he followed his elder brother and moved to Calcutta, where he became a priest.

मन्दिरे भवतारिण्या दक्षिणेश्वरसंस्थिते ।
क्रमेण मातुरर्चायां नियुक्तोऽभूद् गदाधरः ॥११॥

In course of time Gadadhar was appointed to worship the Divine Mother in the temple of Bhavatarini at Dakshineshwar.

स्वस्थाने तत्र सोत्साहं तपस्तप्तमलौकिकम् ।
भूयसा स्वानुरागेण व्याकुलितेन चेतसा ॥१२॥

There, in his own place, he underwent with all earnestness and yearning of mind severe austerities unknown to the world.



किन्तु गच्छति कालेऽपि न लब्ध्वा मातृदर्शनम् ।
शोकं विरहजं सोढुं विफलोऽभूद् गदाधरः ॥१३॥

Even as time went by and not being successful in obtaining the vision of the Divine Mother, Gadadhar failed to bear the pangs of separation from her.

आत्महत्यां विधातुं स कालिकामन्दिरस्थितम् ।
दृष्ट्वासिं कुड्यसंलग्नं तमादातुमधावत ॥१४॥

Deciding to commit suicide, (one day) Gadadhar seeing the sword hanging on the temple wall rushed and held it.

पुत्रार्तिपीडिता माता आविर्भूयाञ्जसा तदा ।
जग्राह सुतदोर्दण्डं दर्शयन्ती निजां विभाम् ॥१५॥

The Divine Mother Kali, troubled by her son's misery, immediately appeared and caught hold of his hand while revealing her own effulgence.

कालीगृहगतं सर्वं चिन्मयं दृष्टमद्भुतम् ।
प्रतिमा वेदिका चैव पूजोपकरणानि च ॥१६॥
माजरि दुर्जने वापि नरे नरेतरान्तरे ।
सैवान्नमन्ति प्रत्यक्षा सच्चिदानन्दरूपिणी ॥१७॥

At that time Gadadhar had a wonderful vision in which he saw everything inside the Kali temple as consciousness—the image, the altar, and the puja accessories. Gadadhar saw that She, whose form is Satchidananda, eats while dwelling inside the cat, the wicked person, and all human beings.

वीतद्वैतधिया जाते सर्वत्राद्वयदर्शने ।
पूजातीतस्थितिं प्राप्य संत्यक्ता मातुरर्हणा ॥१८॥

Having experienced non-duality everywhere, he became free from dualistic cognition. Attaining the realm beyond ritualistic worship, he gave up (thereby) the worship of the Divine Mother.

मातुराज्ञां समादाय तपश्चक्रे यथाक्रमम् ।
तान्त्रिकीं वैदिकीञ्चैव पद्धतिं परिपालयन् ॥१९॥

Having obtained permission from the Divine Mother, Gadadhar underwent spiritual practices by following the norms of the Tantras and the Vedas.

भैरव्यादर्शितोपायैश्चतुःषष्टिमितेषु हि ।
तन्त्रेषु लब्धवान् सिद्धिमनायासं स सत्वरम् ॥२०॥

Being guided by Bhairavi Brahmani, he effortlessly
attained success in sixty-four Tantras.

एवं तोतापुरीपादात् प्राप्तदीक्षेण लीलया ।
निर्विकल्पसमाधिश्च प्रपेदे तेन तत्क्षणात् ॥२१॥

Thus, in course of time, having been initiated by Tota Puri
into Vedanta, he soon reached the state of non-dual absorption.

स्वभार्या सारदां देवीं श्रीविद्येति समचर्यन् ।
साधनान्ते परां काष्ठां स्थापयामास भूतले ॥२२॥

Having worshipped his wife Sri Sarada Devi as Sri Vidya, at the end of
(his) spiritual sadhana, he established on earth a supreme example.

कृत्स्नसाधनसिद्धोऽसौ सर्वशक्तिसमन्वितः ।
नरेन्द्रमुख्यसद्भक्तान् समाचकर्ष निर्मलान् ॥२३॥

Then, having been successful in all sadhanas and being endowed
with all spiritual powers, (Sri Ramakrishna) drew to himself
all true devotees such as Narendra and others.

शिवबोधेन जीवानां सेवोपदेशमद्भुतम् ।
दत्तवान् दयालुरीशः सर्वभूतान्तरस्थितः ॥२४॥

Sri Ramakrishna, the Lord of all in this universe, compassionate,
and dwelling in the hearts of all (beings), gave instruction
to serve everybody considering (each being) as Shiva.

सर्वसाधनमार्गाणामेकलक्ष्यत्वघोषणैः ।
विधाय जगतां शान्तिं रामकृष्णस्तिरोदधे ॥२५॥

Having declared that all spiritual paths have a common goal and having
brought peace to the world, Sri Ramakrishna gave up his (mortal) body.

—Swami Tattwavidananda

EDITORIAL

Sri Ramakrishna: Abode of all Felicity

AN OLD GENTLEMAN and tantric adept curious to know what deity was worshipped in a nice looking temple, once entered a Ramakrishna ashrama. As the old man was leaving after paying obeisance to Sri Ramakrishna's appealing image, he was distractedly muttering to himself, 'but why are they performing the puja of a pujari of Kali? They could have worshipped Kali!'

A pujari, indeed! One is reminded of an incident during Sri Ramakrishna's worldwide centenary celebrations in January 1936, when Swami Akhandananda was president. The swami was unwilling to give his presidential message to the committee even when pressed, saying: 'Well, I have thought over it and come to the question, "What centenary can there be for him who is without beginning and end?"' The committee's desperation was understandable. With a few days more to go, one night Swami Akhandananda was woken up by a voice which said, 'Write this down'. He later told some monks that Sri Ramakrishna had appeared in a vision and said: 'Gangadhar! My children have been organizing a Centenary Celebration all over the world. What does it matter to you if you write a few words by way of your blessings to the whole world?'

In Vedic times individual and social life was centred round the simple *agnihotra*, fire sacrifice. The sages internalized this yajna, sacrifice, through which different gods interacted with humanity. These internalized conceptions grew higher and higher till they became universal.

Scriptures, mythology, metaphysics, history, duties, ethics, and law codes—all grew out and patterned itself around this universal conception. Not only creation emerges from a yajna, the ongoing world process is also a continuous one that will finally merge in the yajna. God is the sacrifice and the sacrificer as well. This twice-daily *agnihotra* had now tremendous meaning and purpose.

The real location of this sacred fire was in the intellect of the man of knowledge. Yajna thus stepped out of the sacrificial altar and spilled into each mental, verbal, and physical karma. Anything performed as yajna was spiritual and had the virtue of connecting a person to the entire universe; anything not done as yajna was useless. Life stood transformed.

Just as there is a pattern to a yajna, similarly the whole universe—gross, subtle, and causal—forms a pattern around the metaphysical yajna. Puja, worship, evolved around this central theme. It also harmonized all the diverse vedic, puranic, and tantric traditions. If the universe patterns around worship, then it also patterns around the worshipper. When Sri Ramakrishna, known in Dakshineswar as 'junior priest', used to worship, the ambience in the temple was awesome. Other brahmanas 'seeing his mind quite absorbed and his body shining all over with a resplendent lustre, said to one another, "It is as if Vishnu Himself has assumed a human body and has sat down to worship"'. An enlightened worshipper is a participant in a systematic mind-boggling interaction of cosmic

principles. Ordinary puja symbolically enacts this interaction.

The essence of all prayer, worship, and meditation is to become identified with the deity. Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Kali, the Divine Mother of the universe. The *Chandogya Upanishad* teaches about such a worshipper: 'He who having known this [Reality] thus performs the Agnihotra-sacrifice, in his case the oblation becomes offered in all the worlds, in all creatures, and in all constituents of a person [body, mind, organs, intellect].' When an unenlightened person identified with the body-mind complex offers worship, it is like pouring oblations into cold ashes. When Sri Ramakrishna performed worship the whole universe was nourished. The world that has been patterned around a sacrifice and that includes all forms of life, all scriptures, mythology, philosophy, and metaphysics becomes energized. Again, the *Chandogya Upanishad* gives this illustration: 'As in this world hungry children wait on their mother, so all creatures wait on the Agnihotra-sacrifice.' The seen and unseen worlds were clamouring due to spiritual hunger. Sri Ramakrishna comes, commences his worship, and through it vitalizes universal life.

Through such worship the worshipper rectifies the flaying patterns and also authenticates them all—all paths, struggles, prayers, thoughts, words, and deeds, from the lowest to the highest, become true. That is why Swami Vivekananda said: 'Salutations to Thee, O Ramakrishna, the Reinstator of Religion, the Embodiment of Religion, the Greatest of all Incarnations.' At a macrocosmic level, humanity has entered into a newer consciousness after Sri Ramakrishna's advent. As days pass by this new consciousness is becoming more and more evident.

Sri Ramakrishna worshipped the Divine Mother of the universe, the dynamic aspect

of Brahman. He became one with the Divine Mother. Sri Sarada Devi used to address him as Kali. Swamiji says: 'She [Kali] worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her own ends.' Sri Ramakrishna was the Divine Mother and the Divine Mother was Sri Ramakrishna. The dynamic and static aspects of Brahman are like a snake in motion and motionless respectively. The child and the mother are one. Sri Ramakrishna's image also has within its hidden dimension the Divine Mother he used to call Brahman.

The committee's argument for a presidential message was that they wanted to celebrate not Brahman's birthday, which is absurd, but Sri Ramakrishna's, who came as an avatara. That day is and will be holy for all eternity. Swami Shivananda, popularly known as Mahapurush Maharaj, speaking on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday celebrations in 1931 said: 'The Master descended on this day. It makes me speechless to think how blessed the day is. ... The Lord of all the worlds and all the creatures, nay, of infinite creation itself, incarnated on this day. ... Never before did such a great spiritual force descend on this earth. The whole world will be saved. It will take centuries to realize who the Master is and what his gift to the world has been.'

We are born a few centuries too early to fully realize what Sri Ramakrishna's gift to all his children in the world is. But though we do not thoroughly understand the magnitude and significance of his advent, we still are benefited by his life and teachings. That is because we are discovering, along with that old gentleman, the source of all our powers.

This special issue is dedicated to that special 'pujari', and its edifying articles written by some of his faithful children, are the various offerings forming a beautiful pattern around him, carrying blessings the world over, for they have touched Sri Ramakrishna.



Sri Ramakrishna: A Unique Phenomenon

Swami Smaranananda

THE FAMOUS AUTHOR Christopher Isherwood begins his biography of *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* with these words:

This is the story of a phenomenon. I will begin by calling him simply that, rather than ‘holy man’, ‘mystic’, ‘saint’ or ‘avatar’; all emotive words with mixed associations which may attract some readers, repel others. A phenomenon is often something extraordinary and mysterious. Ramakrishna was extraordinary and mysterious; most of all to those who were best fitted to understand him. A phenomenon is always a fact, an object of experience. That is how I shall try to approach Ramakrishna.¹

Sri Ramakrishna once remarked that ‘the spiritual experiences of this place (*meaning himself*) have surpassed even the Vedas and Vedanta.’² Though this realm is beyond the common ken, we can try to understand some of the ‘extraordinary and mysterious’ aspects of his life through a careful study of his own recorded experiences.

Normally a sadhaka studies the scriptures and tries to shape his or her life according to their teachings. But Sri Ramakrishna read no books. His was a direct knock on the door of the Divine—in the form of Mother Kali in Rani Rasmani’s Kali temple at Dakshineswar. After days and months of intense longing for her darshan, he was rewarded. The experience is best described in his own words:

The author is Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

There was an unbearable pain in my heart because I could not have a vision of Mother. ... I asked myself: ‘What’s the use of living this life?’ Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that hangs in the Mother’s shrine. I decided to end my life then and there. Like a madman, I ran to the sword and seized it. Then I had a marvellous vision of the Mother and fell down unconscious. Afterwards what happened in the external world or how that day and the next passed, I don’t know. But within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss that I had never before experienced, and I felt the immediate presence of the Divine Mother (212).

Sri Ramakrishna longed to have the Divine Mother’s vision continuously. But a divine voice commanded him to remain in *bhavamukha*. Sri Ramakrishna described this experience thus:

I was in a room of the *kuthi* [bungalow]. After a while a smoke-like mist arose from the floor and covered some space before me. Then I saw within it a golden-complexioned, living, calm face with long flowing beard. That figure looked at me intently and said in a deep voice: ‘My child, you remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha!’ After repeating this three times, the form slowly dissolved into the mist, then that mist also disappeared. This vision reassured me (233).

On two more occasions the Divine Mother’s son was commanded to remain in *bhavamukha* (233–4).

As far as our knowledge goes, the term *bhavamukha* does not appear in the extant scriptural texts, nor can we claim to have understood its

deep meaning and implications. It has been suggested that it represents the state marking the junction of the empirical and the transcendental. A story which the Master told his disciples may illustrate the point.

There was an infinite field beyond a high wall. Four friends tried to find out what was beyond the wall. Three of them, one after the other, climbed the wall, saw the field, burst into loud laughter, and dropped to the other side. These three could not give any information about the field. Only the fourth man came back and told people about it. He is like those who retain their bodies, even after attaining Brahmajnana, in order to teach others. Divine Incarnations belong to this class.³

None of the first three persons had the patience or capacity to turn back and tell their friends what was happening inside. Only the fourth could check himself, thinking of the countless people living outside who were unaware of this place of joy. So he climbed down, told everyone about this joyful place, and shared the joy with the others in the enclosure.

We may say that an avatara, stationed at the junction of the two states—the relative and the Absolute—has the option to be outside the enclosure or within. The avatara may thus be said to remain at the threshold of relative consciousness. Perhaps *bhavamukha* means this. Sri Ramakrishna's life was clearly dedicated to taking humanity Godward.

Spiritual aspirants belonging to different sects of Hinduism came to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar to show him the paths leading to the ultimate Reality, and he too practised the sadhanas of these sects, realizing their goals in a short time. His practice of Advaita Vedanta, under the guidance of Tota Puri was particularly remarkable. Sri Ramakrishna attained *nirvikalpa*

samadhi in three days, leaving Tota Puri amazed. After Tota Puri left, the Master was in that state, oblivious of the outside world, for about six months. He would later point out that after attaining *nirvikalpa samadhi* one can keep one's body only for twenty-one days. But he remained in that state for nearly six months. We do not know whether this rule about the body falling off within twenty-one days of *nirvikalpa samadhi* is mentioned in any scriptural text. In any case, Sri Ramakrishna's experience seems unprecedented in the spiritual traditions of India or elsewhere.

The description of Sri Ramakrishna's Advaita sadhana as the disciple of Tota Puri is both interesting and intriguing:

After initiating me into sannyasa, the Naked one began to teach me various established truths of Vedanta and asked me to withdraw my mind from all objects and dive into the Atman. But, despite all my attempts, during meditation I could not cross the realm of name and form and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in withdrawing my mind from all objects except one: the all-too-familiar form of the Blissful Mother, radiant with Pure Consciousness, that appeared before me as a living reality and prevented me from passing beyond the realm of name and form. For more than three days this happened again and again when I tried to meditate according to the instructions of Vedanta. I almost lost hope of reaching *nirvikalpa samadhi*. I opened my eyes and told the Naked One: 'No, it can't be done. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and force it to be absorbed in the Atman.' Irritated, the Naked One said sharply: 'What do you mean—can't be done? It must be done!' Then he looked around the hut and found a bit of broken glass. He picked it up and stuck its needle-sharp point between my eyebrows and said, 'Fix the mind here.' I sat down to meditate again, firmly determined. As soon as the form of the Divine Mother appeared in my mind, I used my discrimination as a sword

of knowledge and with it mentally cut that form in two. Then all distinctions disappeared from my mind, and it swiftly soared beyond the realm of name and form. I lost myself in samadhi.⁴

The transcendence of the mind from the relative world to the Absolute is common to both Vedanta and Patanjali's system of yoga: *yogah chitta-vritti-nirodhab*. But what is special about Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana and final experience is the process of emptying the mind of all thoughts, *vrittis*. The movement from many *vrittis* to a single *vritti* is common to all disciplines. But taking the mind beyond the sphere of relativity to the Absolute in this manner—by 'cutting' the last *vritti*, Mother Kali in this case, into two—seems both unique and mysterious. Freeing the mind of all *vrittis* results in the destruction of the mind itself, in which case keeping the I-consciousness is not possible. But Sri Ramakrishna came back to normal consciousness after a few months.

One important concept that Sri Ramakrishna highlighted and exemplified in his own incomparable manner was that of the difference between *vidya maya* and *avidya maya*. According to Advaita Vedanta the whole of creation is maya, unreal. The universe is only an appearance. One has to transcend this apparent reality and realize one's own true nature, which is the one undifferentiated homogenous Reality.

Then, how does one explain this continuation in the human body of a realized soul? Sri Ramakrishna explains it as being the result of *vidya maya* retained by great souls like Shankaracharya in order to help aspiring souls progress on the spiritual path. This idea of *vidya maya* appears new. Shankaracharya says in his *Vivekachudamani*:

*Shanta mahanto nivasanti
santo vasantaval-lokahitam charantah;
Tirnah svayam bhima-bhavarnavam
janan-ahetunanyan-api tarayantah.*

There are good souls, calm and magnanimous, who do good to others as does the spring, and who, having themselves crossed this dreadful ocean of birth and death, help others also to cross the same, without any motive whatsoever.⁵

The avatars or Bodhisattvas are such people, who are aware of the unreality of multiform existence and do not get entangled in it. These great ones retain their individuality consciously, often at a divine behest, to help people cross the ocean of samsara.

Interestingly, when Sri Ramakrishna practised a particular spiritual discipline, aspirants of that particular path came to him unsought. Thus, the Ramayat sadhu Jatadhari came to Dakshineswar when he was practising Vaishnava sadhana; the Bhairavi Brahmani came to teach him various Tantric practices, and his interest in Islamic practice was fulfilled by a visiting Sufi sadhaka. These practices gave him the personal experience of diverse paths leading to a common goal. Consequently,


God-realization, in Ramakrishna's view, was especially incumbent upon man for only he, among God's numerous and splendid creations, had the power to conceptualize God and His relationship with this world. In essence, therefore, Ramakrishna made two related, significant points. First, he laid down, as man's duty, a conscious and consistent attempt to relate to God. That alone, in his understanding, gave meaning and substance to human life. Second, God-realization did not necessarily preclude an understanding of the world itself. All worldly experiences became more intelligible once men acknowledged God as the foundation of these experiences.

—Amiya P Sen, *His Words: The Preachings and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, 34

‘While practising Islam, the Master at first had a vision of a radiant Being who looked grave and had a long beard; then he experienced the cosmic Saguna Brahman; and finally his mind merged into absolute Nirguna Brahman.’⁶

The Master’s realization of the Christian way was brought about by the Divine Mother ‘in a miraculous way’. He did not have to undertake any special practice for that purpose. He used to visit Jadu Mallick’s garden-house, situated to the south of the Dakshineswar Kali temple. One day he was sitting in the parlour of the garden-house, looking at the beautiful picture of the child Jesus on his mother’s lap hanging on one of the walls. While the Master was intently looking at this picture, he suddenly perceived rays of light emanating from it and entering his heart. From that moment his mind and heart were, for three consecutive days, filled with thoughts of the Christian faith and all Hindu ideas disappeared from him for the time being. This complete immersion of Sri Ramakrishna’s mind in a particular faith at a particular time is both revealing and instructive.

Sri Ramakrishna’s unique spiritual experiences are not exhausted by what has been described in

his biographies. We do not have access to many of his other experiences because even for understanding them intellectually we need a pure mind, lifted to higher planes of consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna plunged deep into the spiritual realm and many doors, not ordinarily accessible to all spiritual seekers, were opened to him. The depth of his realizations was so profound that the mystery of his life and message continues to intrigue researchers in the field of spirituality. To understand his life and message deeply, intellectual equipment alone cannot suffice; we need to possess sophisticated spiritual equipment too. 

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3. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 354; see also 268.
4. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 312.
5. *Vivekacūḍamaṇi*, trans. Swami Madhavananda, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1978), 13.
6. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 319.

By nature, Sri Ramakrishna was a conversationalist, not a formal religious instructor. His recurring use of stories and parables, as is only too evident from the *Kathamrita*, places him among those who tried to revive older narrative strategies in a greatly transformed world. The quasi-Vedantic text, *Yogavasistha Ramayana*, from which Ramakrishna occasionally borrowed, uses stories and parables to advance a philosophical point. To this, Ramakrishna innovatively added images and metaphors from Bengali rural life—sprawling rice fields and the husking of rice, fish and vendors of fish, toiling arti-

sans, peasants and woodcutters, the housewife and her domestic economy—all of which connected culturally with his audience. Here, there was serious introspection but also nostalgia and merriment. At Dakshineswar, one could occasionally hear Ramakrishna’s followers break out in uproarious laughter at something that he had said. However, when the fun had subsided, at least a few would pause to reflect on the wisdom that lay hidden in the peals of laughter.

—Amiya P Sen, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: The Sadhaka of Dakshineswar*, 162–3

The Person and His Message



Understanding Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Prabhananda

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S APPEARANCE in the mid-thirties of the nineteenth century was a landmark in the global history of religion. In a backward village ninety-eight kilometres from Calcutta, the then capital of British India, a boy named Gadadhar was born and spent his childhood. Extraordinary and mysterious, his words and deeds eventually gave rise to the 'Ramakrishna phenomenon', a term coined by the well-known writer Christopher Isherwood. 'A phenomenon is always a fact, an object of experience', yet not everything about it can be explained rationally.

True understanding of any person demands more than simply knowing facts about his or her life. Understanding a person also implies the ability to grasp a character, the deeds and words, in order to reach the heart of his or her personality. To do this effectively one needs to put aside one's preconceived notions. Understanding does not necessarily demand agreement with the views or beliefs another person holds. But in trying to understand a spiritual giant like Sri Ramakrishna one needs to have *shraddha*, faith in and respect for him, and enough perseverance to thoroughly see, know, and comprehend him in depth.

Sri Ramakrishna was still in his teens when he came to Calcutta from his village. A few years later circumstances brought him to the Dakshineswar temple in a northern suburb of Calcutta, where he plunged into a series of intense spiritual

practices for about twelve years. Through his pure character, deep longing for truth, and sincerity, he reached the highest attainment in the spiritual realm, but he was often ridiculed for his strange behaviour, visions, and experiences. In March 1875, however, the well-known Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen came to know and admire him, bringing him to the attention of the educated public.

Gradually, a small group of householders belonging to middle-class families became charmed by Sri Ramakrishna's captivating personality and teachings and formed a core group of devotees. Even earlier, Sikh sepoy from the Dakshineswar powder magazine and the Barrackpore cantonment, together with a number of Marwari businessmen from the Burrabazar quarters of Calcutta, pilgrims to Gangasagar, and other wayfarers had gathered around the saint, who would entertain his visitors with rapturous devotional singing. But when he plunged into samadhi the singing would stop and a beatific smile would light up his face. Returning to normal consciousness he would then pour out his heart in talks about God, while the visitors would listen and watch entranced. He became popularly known as the Paramahansa and was much sought after by spiritual seekers belonging to different faiths.

Quietly but steadily his life story and teachings spread. Since his passing millions of people—rich and poor, scholars and illiterates—have succeeded in tuning their lives to a higher pitch by reading or hearing about him. While some admit their inability to grasp Sri Ramakrishna, there are others who describe him in the highest

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terms such as ‘the *Pleroma*, the absolute fullness, to which nothing can really be added’.¹ Whether they have comprehended Sri Ramakrishna or not, it should be appreciated that many such blessed people have accepted his words and teachings, each according to his or her capacity.

Sri Ramakrishna’s Influence

In this regard, one cannot but be surprised to note the sharply contrasting and often baffling opinions about Sri Ramakrishna held by some people amply respected during his time. Pratapchandra Mazumdar, a top Brahmo leader, wrote: ‘What is there in common between him and me? I, a Europeanized, civilized, self-centred, semi-sceptical, so-called educated reasoner, and he, a poor, illiterate, shrunken, unpolished, diseased, half-idolatrous, friendless Hindu devotee? Why should I sit long hours to attend to him. ... Why should I be spellbound to hear him? And it is not I only, but dozens like me who do the same.’² William Digby, editor of the *Madras Times* and author of *Prosperous British India*, wrote: ‘During the last century the finest fruit of British intellectual eminence was, probably, to be found in Robert Browning and John Ruskin. Yet they are mere gropers in the dark compared with the uncultured and illiterate Rama Krishna of Bengal, who, knowing naught of what we term “learning”, spake as no other man of his age spoke, and revealed God to weary mortals.’³

On the other hand, Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar found neither a set of commandments and duties nor of virtues and vices in Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings; nor did he find any advocacy or propagation of caste reform, uplift of the masses, or other social questions. However, with regard to the basic issues of daily life, he found a reliable guide and a friend to all.

When God descends on earth in human form, he brings with him his companions, some

of them being *ishvarakotis*, spiritually-advanced souls. Yet, even these souls were humble enough to admit their inability to fully grasp their Master. This happened in the case of past incarnations as well. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes narrated the story of Bhishma. As the great hero lay dying on his bed of arrows, the Pandava brothers and Krishna saw tears flowing from his eyes. When they questioned him about this, Bhishma replied that he was thinking of the unending suffering of the Pandavas, in spite of God himself being their charioteer. This was why he wept. Then he confessed: ‘This makes me feel that I have understood nothing of the ways of God.’⁴

After Sri Ramakrishna’s passing in August 1886, most of his disciples and his consort Sri Sarada Devi were repeatedly assured by him that he was still present and acting from a different plane of consciousness. According to Swami Ramakrishnananda, almost all the direct disciples of the Master had visions of him after his *mahāsamādhi*.⁵ Naturally, believers in such private revelations and apparitions increased in number. Besides, as time passed, Sri Ramakrishna’s life cast its influence on subsequent generations in different ways, and the appeal of his extraordinary life and teachings spread. His words carried wonderful wisdom, but it was without doubt his life more than his words that carried a magic that cast its spell over the educated and the illiterate, mystics and religionists, young and old alike.

Sri Ramakrishna’s life is well-documented, so people need not depend on fragmentary, superficial, incomplete manuscripts, dubious witnesses, or pious legends, as in the case of the lives of similar personalities who lived before him—there are even five photographs of him. Despite all this, after more than one hundred years of studying his life story and teachings from many different perspectives, the problem of knowing and understanding him still haunts us.

Who Is Sri Ramakrishna?

To find a general answer to the problem mentioned above, we may refer to a statement that the historian Arnold Toynbee made in 1948: 'Man is relatively good at dealing with non-human nature. What he is bad at is his dealing with human nature in himself and his fellow human beings.'⁶ According to psychoanalysts, a prerequisite for understanding another person satisfactorily is to have a fairly good understanding of oneself. Sri Ramakrishna did more than this. He could see things in two different ways, from two different planes of consciousness: the plane of non-dual consciousness and that of ordinary consciousness. In his magnum opus *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, Swami Saradananda wrote: 'The Master did not see men and things of the world as we do—that is, as having their present physical identity only. His view of them was what they looked like from higher and higher planes of consciousness. It was, therefore, impossible for him to have, like us, an one-sided opinion or mental attitude with respect to any object of the world. And this was why we could not understand his words and ideas, though he could understand ours.'⁷

However, what was possible for Sri Ramakrishna was not within the reach of others. There is no doubt that Swami Vivekananda understood his Master best. We find flashes of his deep understanding in the course of his talks and recorded conversations. For example, he once remarked: 'The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. ... The books were theories, he was the realisation.'⁸ Even with such insight, Swamiji humbly admitted: 'Truly, I tell you, I have understood him very little. He appears to me to have been so great that, whenever I have to speak anything of him, I am afraid lest I ignore or explain away the truth, lest my little

power does not suffice, lest in trying to extol him I present his picture by painting him according to my lights and belittle him thereby!' (5.390).

When some of the brother disciples of Swami Vivekananda compared notes with each other, it became clear that each one viewed Sri Ramakrishna in the light of his own thinking. One disciple's assessment of Sri Ramakrishna was different from that of another, although they shared common points in several respects. And their unique teacher did not interfere with their ideas; rather, he gave each freedom to understand and accept him independently.

Some people point out that the main obstacle in having a deeper understanding of Sri Ramakrishna is the lack of a true biography. Moreover, as Sister Nivedita heard her master Swami Vivekananda say, 'It was not the words of Ramakrishna but the life they lived with Him that was wanted, and that had yet to be written.'⁹ Explaining his own standpoint, the swami wrote: 'The [Master's] life should be written as an illustration of the doctrines he preached.'¹⁰ Dr Sashibhusan Ghosh made an attempt when he wrote in Bengali *Sri Ramakrishnadeva*, but the final outcome fell far short of people's expectations. 'M', Mahendranath Gupta, planned to take up a similar project, but could not do so.

Though Swami Vivekananda refused to oblige the great devotee Girishchandra Ghosh, who pleaded with him to write a biography of the Master, Swami Saradananda later took up the task. He was the only one among the sixteen monastic disciples who dared to write a voluminous treatise discussing philosophical interpretations of some unique characteristics of their Master's life and teachings. Unfortunately, he could not finish the project, and near the end of his illustrious life of sixty-two years, he made a frank confession: 'When I began to write the *Lila Prasanga* [Sri Ramakrishna's biography]

I thought I understood the Master. But now I clearly see that the life of the Master is very deep. I was merely hovering over the top branches; the root is far beneath the ground.’¹¹

Some serious readers point out that certain uncommon terms used in the biographies of the Master—for example, *viññāna* and *bhāvamukha*—are difficult to comprehend. Regarding the *viññāni*, one biographer defines it as ‘one endowed with *viññāna*’; and *viññāna* as ‘special Knowledge of the Absolute, by which one affirms the universe and sees it as the manifestation of Brahman’.¹² And *bhāvamukha*, in simple terms, means ‘on the threshold of relative consciousness’. Further, it is no less difficult to fathom the significance of samadhi or of *antardāha*—the burning sensation that Sri Ramakrishna suffered for many years—in the context of the Master’s daily life.

To understand the nature of his ecstatic states physicians examined him with a stethoscope, and one of them even thrust his finger into his eye while he was in samadhi. Some people tried to unravel the mystery of his strong reaction to touching metals. Others tested him to see if he was above all weaknesses of flesh. Rather than simply tolerating these challenges, Sri Ramakrishna clearly told his intimate disciples: ‘Test me as the money changers test their coins. You must not accept me until you have tested me thoroughly.’¹³ Swami Vivekananda himself tested his Master till his last days and was fully convinced of his greatness.

Impressed by his personality, various people formed different opinions about Sri Ramakrishna. Some held that he was a tantric par excellence and a Kaula; some others that he was a Vaishnava. A Navarasik group found him to be an embodiment of the nine sentiments. A Baul group regarded him as a Sain, some Vaishnavas as a Gosain, a party of Kartabhajas as Alekh, and some Dashanami sadhus as a Paramahansa. Some Sikhs saw in him the image of Guru Nanak, some Chris-

tian devotees saw Jesus in him, and some Muslim devotees considered him to be one of them. The Brahmos reckoned him to be a knower of Brahman, and a veteran Vedantin like Tota Puri acknowledged him to be a knower of pure Brahman. Some others believed that Sri Chaitanya had descended in the form of Sri Ramakrishna.

Swami Vivekananda observed: ‘Well, it matters nothing, whatever you may call him or think of him, a saint, or a knower of Brahman, or anything. But take it from me, never did come to this earth such an all-perfect man as Shri Ramakrishna.’¹⁴ In spite of the fact that Sri Ramakrishna himself assured his devotees that he was an incarnation of God, we still cannot be sure if we can understand who Sri Ramakrishna truly was. Akshay Kumar Sen, perhaps, was close to the truth when he observed: ‘It is very difficult to recognize the Blessed Lord in a human form. In whatever appearance or attributes may He descend, nobody can recognize Him unless He

Ramakrishna lives very near to the heart of many Western people because they see him as a man and not as an Incarnation as he appears to his disciples. Ramakrishna’s very human approach to the daily problems of life is what endears him to many people. Ramakrishna said to his disciples: Are you seeking God? Very well, look for Him in man; the divinity is manifest itself in man more than in any other object. In truth God is everything; but His power is more or less manifest in other objects. God incarnate in man is the most manifest power of God in the flesh—man is the greatest manifestation of God. And then he goes on to say, ‘the attainment of perfect knowledge is to see God in every man’. When a person like Ramakrishna speaks words like these surely he is very close to God.

—Rev. James B Muckle, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and Spiritual Renaissance’, in *A Bridge to Eternity*, 392

imparts that power to recognise the Lord.’¹⁵

Sri Ramakrishna admitted many times that God does incarnate in human form and then he behaves exactly like a human being. He has the same hunger, thirst, disease, grief, and sometimes even fear.¹⁶ For that reason some take him to be an ordinary being, others see him as a holy person. Only a few can recognize him and revere him as God himself. However, the incarnations are never imprisoned in the world, never entangled by it. Their ego is a ‘thin ego’, and through it they have the uninterrupted vision of God. The ego of the incarnations is like a wall with a hole through which one can see the other side. Though they have a human body, they are always united with God. The incarnation of God is no doubt a mystery.

Explaining the difference between an incarnation of God and ordinary human beings, Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘There is one kind of manifestation of Rama in the Incarnation of God, and another in men. Even the Incarnations are conscious of the body. Embodiment is due to maya. ... But the Incarnation of God puts a bandage over His eyes by His own will, like children playing blind man’s buff. The children stop playing when their mother calls them. It is quite different, however, with the ordinary man’ (243). This explains to some extent why it was so difficult to understand Sri Ramakrishna, but so easy for Sri Ramakrishna to understand others. It is paradoxical that Sri Ramakrishna, who came to this world for the welfare of human beings, was himself so human, though he appeared to be beyond the understanding of human beings.

One day, after coming down from samadhi and regaining partial consciousness of the world, the Master lamented: ‘Alas! To whom shall I say all these? Who will understand me?’ (943). Sometime earlier, when two of his disciples began speaking of him as a divine incar-

nation and the matter was reported to him, the Master laughed, saying: ‘Do they think they will enhance my glory that way? One of them is an actor on the stage and the other a physician. What do they know about Incarnations?’ (20). This very statement seems to deepen the mystery of Sri Ramakrishna, the ‘incarnation of God’.

Again, being an incarnation of God, who by nature is the embodiment of love and compassion, Sri Ramakrishna attracted people throughout his life. And it is but natural that people still feel this attraction; they still want to see him, hear his voice, touch his feet, and interact with him. Just contemplating on this, an earnest spiritual seeker develops great longing to realize Sri Ramakrishna.

How to Understand Sri Ramakrishna

Though an aspirant’s earnestness and strong desire impels him or her to try to perceive God, this is quite a formidable task, as the famous mystic Ramprasad realized. In one of his songs, he says:

When man aspires to understand Her,
Ramprasad must smile;
To think of knowing Her, he says,
is quite as laughable
As to imagine one can swim across
the boundless sea.
But while my mind has understood, alas!
my heart has not;
Though but a dwarf, it still would strive
to make a captive of the moon (106).

Trying to explain this mystery, Debendranath Mazumdar sang a song: ‘Who can comprehend you, unless you reveal yourself?’ Therefore, it all depends on the Lord’s grace and compassion. To pave the way, however, the spiritual seeker needs to have faith and unswerving devotion. This entire topic has also been described in the Upanishads: ‘This Self can be realized, not by instruction, nor by the intellect, nor by much hearing. Whomsoever He chooses, by him alone is He obtained. To

such a person He reveals His real nature.¹⁷

Taking into consideration all these factors, let us look again at the problem of understanding Sri Ramakrishna. While trying to understand Sri Ramakrishna one cannot miss the unique and primary feature of his spiritual endeavour: without the aid of the scriptures or the guidance of spiritual teachers Sri Ramakrishna was able to reach the summit of spiritual life only through his purity, sincerity, devotion, and passionate longing for God. His was an amazingly simple but penetrative and comprehensive approach. Later, he went through traditional disciplines as recommended by the scriptures and spiritual masters, but they merely verified his simple, pure, and unfailing approach and his earlier conclusions about the Truth. His approach was thus a landmark in the global history of applied religion. It has laid bare the most essential requirements of spiritual life: an aspirant's passionate earnestness and pure life, fortified by God's grace.

Let us first look at the traditional approach to sadhana, so that we can form an idea of the metamorphosis that an aspirant's mind undergoes. With the aid of one-pointed devotion, characterized by ardour and intensity, a spiritual seeker may attain in his heart some understanding of Sri Ramakrishna. We may view this in the light of Sri Krishna's teachings in the Bhagavadgita:

*Bhaktiā tvananyayā śakya
aham-evamvidho'ṛjuna;
Jñātum draṣṭum ca tattvena
praveṣṭum ca parantapa.*

But by single-minded devotion alone may I be known in this form, O Arjuna, realized truly, and entered into, O tormentor of foes.¹⁸

Here Sri Krishna says that a sincere devotee, fortified with single-minded devotion, can move forward step by step. At the first step he can know something of God through the scriptures,

but he needs to develop a penetrative insight. After that he can behold God directly. God can indeed be realized directly. In the last stage, the devotee enters into God. This process essentially means the following: first, to accept the ideal of God according to one's capacity; then, to imbibe this ideal and dissolve oneself in it; and finally, to become one with it. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna: 'There are certain characteristics of God-vision. One sees light, feels joy, and experiences the upsurge of a great current in one's chest, like the bursting of a rocket.'¹⁹

The Gita explains this process from another perspective. Sri Krishna says: 'To those, who are ceaselessly united with Me and who worship me with intense love, I lovingly grant that mental disposition (*buddhi-yoga*) by which they come to Me.'²⁰ The exact meaning of *buddhi-yoga* is difficult to grasp; however, it can be said that it is a special power of understanding something, a kind of intuitive power. Swami Tapasyananda points out that true intuition comes to a person who is *satata yukta*, one whose inner life is fully integrated by the practice of self-control and mental discipline. Further, such a person should yearn for God with whole-hearted love, *bhajatām priti-pūrvakam*. To such a person the Lord—Sri Ramakrishna, in this case—grants *buddhi-yoga*.²¹ This is how a spiritual seeker blessed by Sri Ramakrishna can have some understanding of him, the Truth, and have one's doubts resolved. The Gita also explains this experience of fulfilment: 'Yam labdhvā cāparam lābham manyate nādhikam tataḥ; having obtained which no other gain is considered greater.'²²

Sri Ramakrishna lived a unique life. His thoughts, words, and deeds worked in harmony. Swami Vivekananda discovered in Sri Ramakrishna's unique life a method that was very much his own: 'One must learn to put oneself into another person's very soul.'²³ When Sri Ramakrishna wanted to understand Islam, he

wore clothes and ate food like the Muslims, and also had initiation into the Islamic path. One of the means to understand Sri Ramakrishna is perhaps to put into practice this same method in letter and spirit. This means one must live one's life remembering that purity, sincerity, and yearning for God-realization are the basic characteristics of this life. Again, one must have a grasp of the ways and means Sri Ramakrishna followed as well as the essence of his teachings.


While following this process a person's hardest obstacle is the ego. To tackle it Sri Ramakrishna advises prayer for faith and self-surrender. But one has to pray to God with a restless heart. Thus, a true aspirant abandons the fruits of all spiritual practices, knowing well that God's grace is bestowed as and when he wills. The aspirant can only pray for it, just as a kitten cries 'mew, mew' and waits patiently for its mother. The aspirant needs to understand that the fruits belong to God and his is the agency. Even with regard to spiritual practices, the aspirant has to surrender the fruits and the sense of agency. Following the basic principles of bhakti scriptures the aspirant must abide in the faith that God is the only support and the only redeemer.

According to Madhusudan Saraswati, as an aspirant matures in his love and longing the self-same surrender takes three forms—first is the attitude 'I am His', second 'He is mine', and third is the experience 'He is verily I':

*Tasyaivāhaṁ mamaivāsau sa
evāhamiti tridhā;
Bhagavac-cha raṇatvaṁ
syāt-sādhanaḥbhāsa-pākataḥ.*²⁴

Surrender, it seems, takes these forms according to one's spiritual maturity. Thus, as the process of surrender deepens, one's understanding of Sri Ramakrishna also grows in maturity.

But even if a spiritual aspirant does not achieve

complete understanding of God, there should not be any doubt that anyone who has received his blessings must have some measure of understanding and the consequent experience of divine bliss. The compassionate Lord descended in the form of Sri Ramakrishna and lived among men and women only to shower blessings on them and to reorient their lives towards the goal of bliss and perfection. It would, however, be absurd to imagine that one has grasped fully the greatness of God, however great one may be. 

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 16. See, for instance, *Gospel*, 361.
 17. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.23; *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.2.3.
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Sri Ramakrishna at Dharchula

The village was located across the Kali river, at a distance of a mile on one side. The white snow-capped Himalayan peaks made for incomparable beauty. The next day, after having finished his meals, the sannyasin went out to have a look around. Far below was an apple orchard—all branches were covered with blossoms. There were no leaves. It was a beautiful sight.

The sannyasin started walking in that direction. Having reached the flower-laden orchard, he sat down on a block of stone and became immersed in the sight and in thinking of God. He did not notice when dusk descended. A Bhutia man approached him and enquired: 'Where have you put up? In whose house?' He then recalled that the Bhutias unchain their dogs in the evening. Then none dare enter their village—they would be torn apart and eaten! What was to be done now? The interlocutor assured that he would help him back. Having climbed a bit they came across a small house—a courtyard and a few rooms amidst fields. Pointing at it he said it was his house and added, 'Come, let's have some tea.' The sannyasin agreed. What a surprise! As soon as he entered the house he found a small picture of Sri Ramakrishna hanging on the wall. Tea was boiling in the fire ahead and the Bhutia man's wife added butter and salt to it. That is how they make tea.

The sannyasin kept looking at the picture and wondering, 'I was thinking I was the first to enter this house, but you have already seated yourself here.' The

Bhutia wife said, 'Tell him whose picture that is.' The Bhutia man responded, 'This is the picture of a saint, a Mahatma.' Sannyasin: 'How do you know?' The Bhutia: 'Why? Since the time I have brought this picture if I happen to go for some work without having his darshan and offering pranams then things are sure to go wrong; the job will not get done.' This was a rather straightforward explanation.

Sannyasin: 'What is the Mahatma's name?' The Bhutia: 'I don't know. I brought this picture from the town. I liked the picture very much. The shopkeeper said, "This is the picture of a Mahatma"; and the price was ten annas. I bought it.' When the sannyasin said that he knew the Mahatma's name, the Bhutia man exclaimed, 'How do you know? Is he still living? Tell me all about him.' The sannyasin narrated Sri Ramakrishna's life in brief. Tears flowed from the couple's eyes and they kept saying, 'You have come for our sake.' It was one o'clock in the night when the talk ended.

It was necessary to return to the village, otherwise the people there would be very worried. The Bhutia man lit a torch and led him a mile above. On reaching back they found the house full of people. Everyone was very worried. 'Oh, he has come,' they exclaimed, and asked the reason for the delay. The Bhutia man narrated all that had happened—Sri Ramakrishna's story. Many of the listeners had their eyes wet.

—'Reminiscences of Swami Japananda (1898–1972)',
Vivek Jyoti, 48/3, 115



The Magnitude of Ramakrishna's Life and Message

Swami Chetanananda

ONE OF MY FRIENDS USED TO tease me by saying, 'Hinduism is a weak religion because God has to incarnate again and again to rejuvenate that religion, but Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam have only one prophet.' I would answer quoting from the *Vishnu Purana*: 'There are some people who neither do their duties nor practise religion, but repeat, "God, God". They are enemies of God, because God has to take a human form to demonstrate true religion to them.' Moreover, Krishna said in the Bhagavadgita that when religion declines and irreligion prevails God incarnates in every age, to protect the virtuous and punish the wicked. That is why we find many

avatars, divine incarnations, in Hinduism. As the same moon rises in the sky again and again, so the same God descends on earth as a human being in different places and at different times to fulfil the need of the age and to lead us to the goal of human life. This is not a fantasy; the lives of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, Chaitanya, and Ramakrishna attest to the Gita's statement.

The Greatest Avatara

On 6 February 1898 Swami Vivekananda composed the following salutation mantra to Ramakrishna: 'O Ramakrishna, establisher of righteousness, embodiment of all religions, the greatest of the avatars, salutations to Thee.' The word 'greatest' created some controversy. Here are some explanations: Of course each avatara is God in human form and they are all endowed

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with equal powers, but they do not all release the entirety of their power. Think of a golfer who has sufficient strength to hit a ball a long distance, but he strikes the ball only as hard as necessary to reach the next hole. Similarly, avatars release only as much power as necessary to fulfil their mission in a particular age. For example, Rama killed Ravana and other demons that were disrupting peace; Krishna destroyed Kamsa and many unrighteous beings that were killing and torturing innocent people; Buddha fought against animal sacrifice, ritualism, and priestcraft; Christ wanted to establish the religion of love and compassion by trying to remove hypocrisy and injustice. We also find that all the avatars emphasized the virtues of truth, righteousness, justice, and good conduct.

In this modern age Ramakrishna did not kill any demons, nor did he fight any person. Rather, he destroyed the greatest demon that plagues the human mind: doubt regarding God's existence. It is easier to kill a demon or an unrighteous person than to eradicate doubt. Ramakrishna's ecstasies, visions, and experiences of samadhi proved to him that God exists. In this way he removed all doubts about the existence of God from the minds of his devotees. Moreover, he demonstrated how one can realize God and even imparted spiritual experiences to many with a touch.

On 1 March 1885 Ramakrishna told M. about one of his experiences: 'I saw Satchidananda come out of this sheath [his body]. It said, "I incarnate Myself in every age." ... I saw that it is the fullest manifestation of Satchidananda; but this time the Divine Power is manifested through the glory of *sattva*.'¹ It is due to the preponderance of the *sattva* quality in Ramakrishna that he experienced samadhi many times a day. According to available records, this was not seen earlier in other avatars.

As all rivers lead to the ocean, all religions are different paths to God. Among avatars only Ramakrishna practised different religions and proclaimed: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' In this way he established an ideal harmony of religions for our present age, in which religions are continually in conflict and hatred and violence. Ramakrishna repeatedly stated that the goal of human life is to realize God. He taught a religion badly needed today, a religion that is constructive and not destructive, scientific and not fanatical, practical and not theoretical, rational and not superstitious, universal and not parochial. Truly, Ramakrishna worked to create unity in our time.

The followers of every religion think that their prophet is the greatest. Once Sariputra said to Buddha:

'You are the manifestation of supreme knowledge, and none is greater than you.'

Buddha replied, 'Do you have knowledge of the past arhats?'

'No, I do not, Lord.'

'Are you aware of the knowledge of the present Buddha?'

'No, Lord.'

'Then how do you dare make such a bold statement?'

'I made this statement based on the limits of human understanding and by accepting the standard of the highest ideal of Buddhahood.'²

Similarly, Vivekananda used the expression 'the greatest of the avatars' based on his understanding of Ramakrishna and his own spiritual experiences. Vivekananda himself admitted that he had understood very little of the infinite Ramakrishna. He said: 'To remove all this corruption in religion, the Lord has incarnated Himself on earth in the present age in the

person of Sri Ramakrishna. The universal teachings that he offered, if spread all over the world, will do good to humanity and the world.’³ Some of Ramakrishna’s westernized disciples were amazed when they saw how their Master faced agnostics, atheists, sceptics, and materialists, and silenced them through his infallible logic, apt and convincing illustrations, magnanimous personality, and spiritual power—even though he had no formal education.

It is not proper to try and judge the greatness of avatars with our limited understanding, yet from a worldly standpoint we do see a difference in the manifestation of each avatara. God smiles at the ignorance of his children when Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and others quarrel among themselves about the greatness of their religion and their respective prophets. But all quarrels and hatred will stop when they realize that God is One without a second and that they all are his children. This is the attitude that Ramakrishna taught to humanity in the modern age.

Dimension of Ramakrishna’s Activities

All avatars travelled to some extent to fulfil their mission and spread their message among people. Ramachandra’s activities were confined to Ayodhya, Chitrakut, Dandakaranya, Panchavati, Rameswaram, and Sri Lanka; Krishna’s movements and activities took place in Mathura, Gokula, Vrindavan, Dwaraka, and Kurukshetra; Buddha carried his message to Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar during his lifetime; Jesus preached in Galilee, Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. At that time the population of the world was not as large as it is now and many parts of the world were unknown. People now call the world a global village. Although Ramakrishna went on pilgrimage to Deoghar, Varanasi, Mathura, Vrindavan, Prayag, and Navadwip, he did not travel

very far to spread his message. He mainly stayed at the Dakshineswar temple garden and now and then visited nearby Calcutta by horse carriage.

During Ramakrishna’s time Calcutta was the capital of British India, the citadel of materialistic civilization. Many people in Calcutta imitated the English lifestyle and were carried away by the current of Western culture. When the Master said ‘Calcutta people’, he meant the city’s westernized and worldly inhabitants. They were slaves of the British and beggars in search of name and fame, and their main goal was the enjoyment of lust and gold. They were bound souls and atheists. Thus, when he referred to ‘Calcutta people’, the Master meant all the atheistic hedonists of the world. ‘Calcutta people’ can also be found in Europe, America, and other parts of the globe. Ramakrishna remarked: ‘It is not in England alone that one sees attachment to worldly things. You see it everywhere.’⁴

With his sharp, discriminating intellect, Ramakrishna understood that a life based on worldly enjoyment cannot bring permanent peace and happiness. And he knew that by confronting the materialistic milieu of Calcutta, he could change materialism throughout the world. If the capital is conquered, then it is not necessary to conquer the entire country.

In various ways Ramakrishna gave his life to help the people of ‘Calcutta’. But he especially tried to build their spiritual life, the source of eternal peace and happiness. In fact, most people of the world run after lust and gold. Ramakrishna conquered those two invisible enemies of spiritual life and concluded, ‘*kamini kanchan maya*; lust and gold are maya.’ The world was in need of Ramakrishna, who was fully capable of giving a suitable answer to the hedonistic and materialistic philosophers of the West.

A Sikh battalion was once marching towards Fort William, the British fort in Calcutta. When

the soldiers saw Sri Ramakrishna in a carriage, they dropped their rifles to the ground and bowed down to him, shouting, 'Victory to the guru!' The British Commander was nonplussed. When he asked the Sikh soldiers about their unusual behaviour they replied that it was the custom of their religion to show respect for their guru in that manner. Thus, Ramakrishna conquered the British fort by merely sitting in his carriage. It was not even necessary for him to step out of the vehicle. This was truly amazing! The Master later compared the road to Fort William with the path to perdition. He said: 'Men do not realize how far they are dragged down by women. Once I went to the Fort in a carriage, feeling all the while that I was going along a level road. At last I found that I had gone four storeys down. It was a sloping road. A man possessed by a ghost does not know he is under the ghost's control. He thinks he is quite normal' (439).

It takes time for the message of an avatara to spread. Ramachandra's and Krishna's eternal message of truth and righteousness were recorded by Valmiki and Vyasa in Sanskrit, and they are still spreading among the people. Buddha's disciples recorded 84,000 of his teachings in the Tripitakas. After 400 years his message spread during Emperor Ashoka's reign in 250 BCE. Christ's teachings were recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. It takes only two and a half to three hours to read what Christ said in the Bible, but those immortal teachings are still spreading. In 597 CE, during the time of Pope Gregory the Great, Augustine brought Christianity to England. At that time it was easy to proselytize: If the king and queen were converted to a particular religion, all of their subjects would accept that religion. But those days are gone.

Science and technology have made the world small. Ramakrishna's message encircled

the globe within seven years after his passing away. His main disciple, Swami Vivekananda, presented his guru's message of universal religion at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Yet even now the spiritual current of Ramakrishna has not yet become fully manifest. The Master himself said: 'I have seen big steamers going by on the Ganges, at the time hardly noticing their passing. But oh, my! What a terrific noise is heard after a while, when the waves splash against the banks!' (322). Similarly, people cannot recognize the avatara when he comes. His life and mission become more apparent after some time has passed.

Forms of Religious Intolerance

Religion is supposed to bring peace and bliss. The Golden Rule is the same in all religions.

Buddhism: 'Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.'⁵

Christianity: 'Do for others what you want them to do for you; this is the meaning of the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.'⁶

Hinduism: 'Whatever you consider injurious to yourself, never do to others. This is the essence of dharma [righteousness].'⁷

Islam: 'No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself.'⁸

Judaism: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. That is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.'⁹

Despite all these wonderful teachings there is so much intolerance, narrowness, bigotry, fanaticism, unrest, mistrust, and the consequent bloodshed among people of all religions.

Once an old rabbi from New York told me that he wondered what Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, and Buddha think of all the hatred and animosity between followers of their religions. He thought they must be ashamed by the

foolishness of their children, whom they never taught such things.

A professor of world religions at the Harvard Divinity School once asked this question to his students: 'How can we solve the problem of religious intolerance and bloodshed in this world?' A Muslim student replied: 'This problem will be solved if all people in the world become Muslims.' A Christian student said that there would be no more problems if all people become Christians. The professor replied: 'But I see sectarian fighting among Muslims. See how the Shias and Sunnis are fighting among themselves.' Then, calling the students' attention to the fighting between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, the professor told this story: 'Once there was a peace conference that included a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and a Jewish rabbi. An angel appeared before them and asked how peace could be restored in Ireland. The minister said: "Peace will reign supreme if all Catholics leave Ireland." The priest said: "There will be permanent peace if there is not a single Protestant here." The angel then asked the rabbi for his opinion, and he said: "I have no personal opinion. Just attend to the wishes of these two gentlemen, and then there will be peace in Ireland."'

Ramakrishna's Message Counters Intolerance

Ramakrishna was born at a critical time of religious history. Referring to the significance of Ramakrishna's message to the modern world Vivekananda said:

This is the message of Sri Ramakrishna to the modern world. 'Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more that this is de-

veloped in a man, the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization. Only those can understand who have felt. Only those that have attained to spirituality can communicate it to others, can be great teachers of mankind. They alone are the powers of light.

The more such men are produced in a country, the more that country will be raised; and that country where such men absolutely do not exist is simply doomed, nothing can save it. Therefore, my Master's message to mankind is 'Be spiritual and realize truth for yourself.' He would have you give up for the sake of your fellow beings. He would have you cease talking about love for your brother, and set to work to prove your words. The time has come for renunciation, for realization; and then you will see the harmony in all the religions of the world. You will know that there is no need of any quarrel, and then only will you be ready to help humanity. To proclaim and make clear the fundamental unity underlying all religions was the mission of my Master. Other teachers have taught special religions which bear their names, but this great teacher of the nineteenth century made no claim for himself. He left every religion undisturbed because he had realized that in reality, they are all part and parcel of one eternal religion.¹⁰

In Ramakrishna's life we find a synthesis of four yogas: karma, jnana, bhakti, and raja. Moreover, the philosophies of the three main schools of Vedanta—dualism, qualified nondualism, and nondualism—were harmonized in his teachings. He lived his life at a crossroads where many religious sects of India met. He never spoke a harsh word against any faith. He was so all-embracing that members of every sect thought that he was one of them. His all-encompassing love and compassion transcended sectarian narrowness and

bigotry. Truly, Ramakrishna's life was a bridge between the ancient and the modern, between the East and the West.

Ramakrishna came to make religion simple. He knew that human beings in this age had complex personalities and little time to practise spiritual disciplines and think of God. Peace and bliss cannot be bought from the market. They can be acquired only through leading a spiritual life. For this reason Ramakrishna's teachings are practical and universal, free from doctrines and dogmas. They do not need any commentary. Ramakrishna incorporated into his teachings parables, symbols, songs, stories, folklore, myths, scientific reasoning, anecdotes from ordinary life, and examples from nature as well as the behaviour of humans and animals. He seldom quoted the scriptures; rather, he taught from his personal experience and explained the deep truths of spiritual life in an utterly simple way. Here are some examples of Ramakrishna's teachings, which suit any temperament:

- You see many stars in the sky at night, but not when the sun rises. Can you therefore say that there are no stars in the heavens during the day? O human beings, because you do not find God in your ignorance, say not that there is no God.

- God dwells in all beings, but all beings do not identify themselves with God, so they suffer.

- Some people shed a jugful of tears to have children; some cry for money and property; but who longs to see God? Those who want God, find Him.

- In this Kaliyuga a human being can attain perfection in three days. Those who cry with a longing heart for God day and night see Him.

- Question: 'How can one ascertain the state of perfection?'

Answer: 'As potatoes and eggplants become soft when they are boiled, so people become

A devotee from Ballygunge, Kolkata, said to M (on 12 February 1919): 'You all are very fortunate. You have touched Sri Ramakrishna, seen him, heard his talks, and served him.' M replied: 'No. Sri Ramakrishna has said that all his followers will receive his splendour. His splendour is discernment, renunciation, knowledge, devotion, and love. If one thinks of Sri Ramakrishna, good impressions are formed within. ... The devotee calls on God because of God's greatness. It is God who makes the devotee call on him. ... Sri Ramakrishna said that the Divine Mother was making all act. Even now, if one meditates on Sri Ramakrishna's form, or if one meditates on his teachings, it amounts to contemplating his person (just as we saw him while he was living). The result is the same.'

—Rameshchandra Sarkar, 'Srima Samipe',
Udbodhan, 67/8, 437

very soft or humble when they attain perfection. Their egos dissolve completely.'

- A room may be dark for a thousand years, but it is lighted instantly as soon as a lamp is lit. Similarly, one glance of God's grace can wipe away sins accumulated in thousands of births.

- If one drops a salt doll, a cloth doll, and a stone doll in the ocean, the salt doll melts instantly and loses its individual existence. The cloth doll becomes soaked with water—it does not become one with it and it maintains its own separate existence. Water does not enter into the stone doll at all. A free soul is like the salt doll, a worldly soul is like the cloth doll, and a bound soul is like the stone doll.

- The sun may shine equally everywhere, but it reflects more clearly in clean water, mirrors, and other transparent objects. Similarly, God may dwell in every heart, but He manifests more completely in the hearts of holy people.

- Tears of repentance and tears of joy come out from opposite corners of the eyes: the former from the inner corner and the latter from the outer corner.

- Question: 'Nowadays many preachers are preaching religion. What do you think of them?'

Answer: 'It is like a man who has food for one person, but he has invited one hundred. After practising a little sadhana, he has started to make money by initiating disciples like a professional guru.'

- Question: 'What is real preaching?'

Answer: 'Real preaching requires that one be absorbed in God before preaching spirituality to others. He who tries to make himself free, preaches well. Hundreds of people from all directions come to one who is free and they ask for instruction. When the flowers bloom, bees come of their own accord.'

- Let the boat be in the water, but not water in the boat. Let a spiritual aspirant live in the world, but not let worldliness enter inside him.

- The same God manifested here as Krishna and manifested there as Jesus.

- God laughs twice. When two brothers divide the land, saying, 'This part is mine and that part is yours,' God laughs. He says to Himself, 'The whole universe belongs to Me, but they say they own this portion or that portion.' When the physician says to a patient's mother, 'Don't be afraid, mother; I shall certainly cure your boy,' God laughs. He says to Himself, 'I am going to take his life, and this man says he will save it!'

- When shall I be free? When 'I' ceases to be. If 'I' wants to remain, let it stay as a servant-I of God.

- Neither sin nor mercury can be hidden.

- One who eats radish belches radish; one who eats cucumber belches cucumber. What is inside of a person comes out through his or her speech.

- One cannot see God without renouncing lust and gold.

- Question: 'What should I do with bad thoughts?'

Answer: 'Let bad thoughts arise in the mind; they cannot do any harm until you do something wrong.'

- Once the Master said, 'If you want to understand after hearing one sentence, come to me. And if you want to understand after hearing a thousand words, go to Keshab Chandra Sen.' A man asked him, 'Please give me knowledge in one sentence.' He said, '*Jagat mithya Brahma satya*'; this world is impermanent and Brahman is real.'

- One cannot achieve anything if there is any theft in the chamber of the heart [meaning hypocrisy].

- Friend, as long as I live so long do I learn.

- As many faiths, so many paths. Have steadfast devotion to your path, but never hate or criticize the paths of others.

- God loves simplicity. Call on Him with a simple and pure mind. You will then surely find Him.¹¹

Ramakrishna's Symphony

Ramakrishna lived for only fifty years, but the impact of his life and message is immense. It is not possible for ordinary people to comprehend the greatness of avatars, so we try to get some understanding of them through the words of great thinkers and savants of the world.

Romain Rolland, a French writer and Nobel Prize winner, wrote: 'I am bringing to Europe, as yet unaware of it, the fruit of a new autumn, a new message of the Soul, the symphony of India, bearing the name of Ramakrishna. ... The man whose image I here evoke was the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.'¹²

The famous English historian Arnold J. Toynbee wrote: 'Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions ... can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves.'¹³

Joseph Campbell, an American writer and orientalist wrote: 'Sri Ramakrishna cut the hinges of the heavens and released the fountains of divine bliss' (32).

The Russian novelist and social reformer Leo Tolstoy said: 'Wonderful sayings! Ramakrishna ... a remarkable sage' (33).

The Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi wrote: 'The story of Ramakrishna Paramahansa's life is a story of religion in practice. His life enables us to see God face to face.'¹⁴


It is said that we have enough religion to hate one another, but not enough to love one another. Religious sects are not bad, but sectarianism is horrible: it teaches people to hate others. This world would be an awfully boring place if all people looked alike, thought alike, ate alike, dressed alike, drove the same type of car, prayed the same prayer, learned the same things, and died from the same disease.

Vivekananda once said: 'It is the clash of thought, the differentiation of thought, that awakens thought. Now, if we all thought alike, we would be like Egyptian mummies in a museum, looking vacantly at one another's faces.'¹⁵

In this diverse world if we cannot live together in peace, we shall die together by killing each other. Love unites and hatred separates. Hatred cannot be conquered by hatred, it can be conquered only by love. All avatars teach us to love one another, but religious bigotry, narrowness, and superstition separate us from one another.

Variety is the spice of life. A restaurant that lists various kinds of food on its menu attracts many people, because people get bored if they

eat the same food every day. Ramakrishna did not care for one-sidedness. He used to say, 'Why do I eat a variety of dishes? In order not to become monotonous.'¹⁶ Again, he said: 'One player is producing only a monotone on his flute, while another is creating waves of melodies in different ragas and raginis. That is my attitude. Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes?' (1009–10).

In this present age Ramakrishna played a variety of notes on his divine flute and created a symphony to blend all 'isms' of the world. He taught humanity to listen to the splendid symphony of the Soul and realize the divine unity in the diversity of this world. 

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Sri Ramakrishna: The ‘New Man’ of the Age

Swami Bhajanananda

Eṣeche nūtan mānuṣ dekhbi jadi āy cale.

A New Man has come; if you wish to see him, come, let us go.

THIS IS THE OPENING LINE of a beautiful Bengali song on Sri Ramakrishna, which is set to a lilting tune and sung in many Ramakrishna ashramas, especially on Sri Ramakrishna's birthdays. The song was composed about a hundred years ago. The young people who used to sing this song and dance to its tune grew old and passed on. In subsequent years, generation after generation, thousands of people have sung this song and have grown old or passed on. For all of them Sri Ramakrishna was the New Man. Men and women come and go, but Sri Ramakrishna abides as the New Man, and will apparently continue to do so for centuries to come. The reason for this timeless newness of Sri Ramakrishna is that he represents the archetypal or prototypal man of the present age.

The Epochs

Anybody who studies history can see that human culture passes through several stages of development. These stages are known as epochs, ages, or eras. An epoch refers to a certain period in human history during which a certain *zeitgeist* prevails in society. By *zeitgeist*—a term popularized by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel—is meant the general

intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era; the ideas, beliefs, and values that dominate the collective mind of the people during a given period.

As regards the nature of the succession of epochs, there are two main views. According to one view, historical progression is linear: human culture goes on progressing from a primitive or less developed stage to more and more advanced stages—Hegel, Karl Marx, and several others held this view. According to the other view, the succession of epochs takes place in a cyclic way.

The cyclic theory of the succession of different epochs is found in several ancient cultures such as Indian, Greek, and Chinese. In Indian culture these epochs are called *yugas*, which are enumerated as Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali. These *yugas* are believed to recur in long cycles in the same sequential order. The ancient Greeks and Romans also conceived human history as consisting of ever-recurring cycles of four ages, which they defined as Golden, Silver, Copper, and Iron. In the writings of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca it is described how history begins with the Golden Age, which is an age of innocence and simplicity, and how increase in wealth and luxury leads to vices and degeneration.

The theory of cycles was revived in the nineteenth century by Nietzsche and, later on, by Oswald Spengler and other thinkers. Spengler regarded culture as a living organism: just as human life has the four stages of childhood, youth, old age, and death, so has culture four stages. He believed that Western culture is in a

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state of irremediable decline. Arnold Toynbee, Pitrim Sorokin, Carroll Quigly, and other thinkers have also held the view that human history passes through periods of growth, prosperity, and decline and that Western culture is in a state of decline. But according to them, after the decline a resurgence of culture may take place.

Paradigm Shifts

Even without accepting any of the above theories, if we carefully study human history, we can see that it consists of a series of epochs, each one being characterized by a set of dominant thoughts, a certain belief pattern, values, and outlook on life. A paradigm shift in all these elements of culture takes place when an epoch gives way to another epoch. This paradigm shift starts with a fundamental epochal question or set of questions.

Western culture has its roots deep in Greek culture. Around the sixth century BCE a new epoch began in Greek culture when several thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Empedocles, and others raised the question: what is the ultimate substance of which the universe is made up? Three hundred years later came Socrates, who opened a new epoch with the basic question: what is virtue? The answer he gave was: virtue is knowledge. Three hundred years later there arose in Palestine a young carpenter's son named Jesus, who gave a different answer to the above question. His answer was: virtue is love—love for man and love for God. With this answer a new millennium began in Europe. The questions raised by the ancient Greek philosophers were taken up again in the sixteenth century.

At the dawn of Indian culture the Vedic Rishis raised some basic questions: What is the nature of the ultimate Reality? What is the real nature of man? What is life? What is the root from which life springs again and again? What

is the real source of all happiness? With these questions began a new epoch in the history of Indian culture.

Around the sixth century BCE, Buddha raised the question: what is the root-cause of all human suffering? With that he inaugurated another epoch. The Vedic and Buddhist paradigms continued as parallel streams in India for about a thousand years, until Acharya Shankara arose in the eighth century CE and established the supremacy of Advaita Vedanta, thereby opening a new epoch. With the introduction of Islam in the eleventh century another major paradigm shift took place in Indian culture.

The greatest paradigm shift in Indian culture began in the eighteenth century, when it encountered Western culture. Three aspects of Western culture posed challenges to Indian culture: materialistic science, which called in question traditional religious beliefs; open society based on equality and social justice, which was in contrast to the caste-bound Indian society based on inequality and social injustice; and the concept of God as the saviour of sinners, the poor, the downtrodden, and the sick. It was at that critical juncture that Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda arose and met these challenges.

In the year 1881 Swami Vivekananda—then a college student known as Narendra—went to Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar and put to him the question, 'Sir, have you seen God?' Without a moment's hesitation Sri Ramakrishna answered, 'Yes, I see him as clearly as I see you, in fact more intensely.' Sri Ramakrishna also told him, on a later occasion, that he saw God in him and in all human beings. With the above question and answer Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda opened a new epoch in the history of human culture.

For all their apparent simplicity, the above question and answer have epochal significance.

More than fifty years before science began to confirm such views [about the unity of matter and spirit] tentatively, Ramakrishna realized these truths in his own being and gave them to the world. He is a great prophet who ushered in the new age some time before the doctrines and the structures of the age of dualism began to give way and break down. Ramakrishna himself is a symbol of such richness and depth that he has to be realized to be understood. No man can bring him to us. Only he himself can make us know him.

—Dr Gualtherus H Mees,

‘Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Symbolism’,
Vedanta for East and West, 11/3, 81–2.

In the first place, they have enabled countless people to recover their faith in God. Secondly, they have freed religion from the constraints of scriptures and have paved the way for establishing harmony among world religions. Thirdly, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda separated spirituality from traditional religions, making spirituality an independent personal quest for the ultimate Truth in the depths of one’s soul. They further showed that this inner quest, which had formerly been confined only to a small class of contemplatives, is possible for all people and should indeed become an essential dimension of everyone’s life. It was this separation of spirituality from the cultic, ritualistic, and institutional matrix of religion that in due course developed into a universal spiritual movement that has been growing strong in recent years, especially in Western countries, under such names as ‘New Age Movement’, ‘secular spirituality’, ‘global spirituality’, and ‘spiritual revolution’.

The Power of Ideas

The nineteenth-century novelist and thinker

Victor Hugo said, ‘Nothing in this world is so powerful as an idea whose time has come.’ An idea is the linguistic expression of a piece of knowledge. Ideas expressed in a logical form constitute what is known as ‘reason’. Just as animals are guided by instincts, human beings are guided by ideas. Hegel, Toynbee, and other philosophers of history have shown that ideas have played an important role in determining the course of human history. In a sense, human history may be regarded as the history of ideas. However, the popular understanding of ideas is superficial. To have a deeper understanding of ideas it is necessary to study the views of great thinkers.

It was in the fourth century BCE that the Greek philosopher Plato first postulated the self-existence of ‘ideas’, independent of human minds and external objects. Every object in the universe is only a copy or shadow of an eternal Idea or Form or Archetype. This Idea cannot be perceived or known by ordinary thinking. All these ‘ideas’ constitute a well-ordered, perfectly logical, eternal system known as the Logos, which is the basis of true reason. Plato’s student Aristotle taught the reality of external objects and denied the eternality of Platonic ‘ideas’. From that time Western philosophers have been divided into two groups: idealists, who hold that ‘ideas’ constitute the sole reality, and realists, who hold that external objects constitute the sole reality.

In Indian philosophy the third century BCE philosopher Bhartrihari first propounded the self-existence of knowledge independent of mind. Knowledge exists as independent units called *sphoṭa*. The function of words and sentences is to reveal the knowledge, *sphoṭa*, which they symbolize. Words are perishable and unreal, whereas *sphoṭa* is unchanging and eternal. All individual *sphoṭas* are parts of a universal *sphoṭa* known as Shabda Brahman.

The Mimamsakas reject the theory of *sphoṭa* and hold the opposite view, that letters and words are eternal. Vedantins also reject the *sphoṭa* theory. According to Advaitins, Brahman alone is eternal. Letters and words may also be regarded as eternal, but only in the sense that they are created at the beginning of each *kalpa*, cycle of creation, exactly in the same way they existed in the previous *kalpa*. Knowledge is in the mind; it does not exist independently. Atman is the ultimate source of consciousness or awareness. But to know anything the medium of a *vyrtti*, mental modification, is necessary. Knowledge is the result of the illumination of *vyrttis* by the light of the Atman. *Vyrttis* may be produced by external perception, by reading books, or by thinking. *Vyrttis* are of two main kinds: *nāma-vyrtti*, which produces words, and *rūpa-vyrtti*, which produces images in the mind. Knowledge gained through *vyrttis* gives rise to ideas.

In recent years ideas have gained great importance in all fields. One reason for this is the explosion of knowledge caused by the ongoing electronic revolution. All over the world nations are moving from 'agricultural society' or 'industrial society' to 'knowledge society'. India is trying to leapfrog from an agricultural economy to a knowledge-based economy. In a knowledge society nothing is more important than new ideas. Hence, innovation and creativity have become important aspects of present-day education.

Another factor that has contributed to the importance of ideas in recent years is the new line of thinking that considers ideas, concepts, values, and other elements of cultural information to be self-propagating units termed 'meme'. Meme is compared to the gene embedded in a chromosome. Just as genes determine the physical traits of a living organism, memes determine the ideas, beliefs, and culture of a human being.

It is also held that memes undergo evolution following the same Darwinian principles of variation, competition, and natural selection. Just as genes combine to form complexes, which determine physical traits, so memes combine to form 'meme complexes', which determine the nature of a culture. A whole new branch of social science known as 'memetics', on the lines of genetics, has come into existence.¹

It is in the light of the ancient and modern streams of thought mentioned above that we have to understand Swami Vivekananda's views on ideas as determinants of cultural epochs.

Swamiji's Concept of Epochal Ideas

Swami Vivekananda attempted to reconcile and unify Bhartrihari's concept of *sphoṭa* and Shabda Brahman with the Vedantic concept of Hiranyagarbha, the Sankhyan concept of Mahat, and the ancient Greek idea of Logos. In his discourse on bhakti yoga, Swamiji writes:

In the universe, Brahma or Hiranyagarbha or the Cosmic Mahat first manifested himself as name, and then as form, i.e. as this universe. All this expressed sensible universe is the form, behind which stands the eternal inexpressible Sphota, the manifest as *Logos* or Word. This eternal Sphota, the essential eternal material of all ideas or names, is the power through which the Lord creates the universe; nay, the Lord first becomes conditioned as the Sphota, and then evolves Himself out as the yet more concrete sensible universe.²

Vedanta holds that the microcosm and the macrocosm, the individual and the universal, are built on the same plane, in structure and function. Thought vibrations arising in individual minds travel like radio waves and influence other minds. In fact, the mind of each person acts like a broadcasting centre and also as a radio receiving set.

Regarding this Swamiji says:

Good and evil thoughts are each a potent power, and they fill the universe. As vibration continues so thought remains in the form of thought until translated into action. ... We are the heirs to good and evil thought. If we make ourselves pure and the instruments of good thoughts, these will enter us. The good soul will not be receptive to evil thoughts. Evil thoughts find the best field in evil people; they are like microbes which germinate and increase only when they find a suitable soil (6.134).

Apart from the thoughts of individuals, there are also universal thought waves. These arise in the Mahat, cosmic mind, and are the expressions of cosmic *sphoṭa* known as Shabda Brahman. These universal thoughts arise periodically and spread all over the world, creating new epochs in human history. They determine the zeitgeist of an epoch. Regarding this Swami Vivekananda says: 'Mere [human] thoughts are like little wavelets; fresh impulses to vibration come to them simultaneously, until at last one great wave seems to stand up and swallow up the rest. These universal thought-waves seem to recur every five hundred years, when invariably the great wave typifies and swallows up the others (ibid.).

Role of the Prophet

Arnold Toynbee, in his twelve-volume *Study of History*, says that when wealth and vices increase a civilization undergoes decline. At that critical juncture a small group of thinkers who have new ideas and are inspired by new ideals arise and rejuvenate the culture by inaugurating a new epoch. He calls this group the 'creative minority'. How does this creative minority arise, and how does it get its motivating ideas? After examining several alternatives Toynbee comes

to the conclusion that a group of people associated with a spiritual leader, such as a prophet or incarnation of God, alone succeeds in inaugurating a new epoch in the cultural history of humanity. Swami Vivekananda's ideas, expressed forty years before Toynbee's, are in accord with the above view.

According to Swamiji, the prophet comes riding the crest of the universal thought wave. By 'prophet' is meant an illumined world teacher who comes with a new message for the whole humanity. All the world religions accept the concept of world teacher. Hinduism and Christianity have the idea of incarnation of God. In Christianity God is believed to incarnate only once in human history, whereas in Hinduism God is believed to incarnate again and again as an avatara 'whenever virtue declines and evil prevails'.

Whatever be the name by which the world teacher is known, the universal thought waves, the epochal ideas, originate from him. He originates, energizes, spreads, and sustains the universal spiritual ideas that create the zeitgeist of the epoch. Speaking about this Swamiji said:

It is this which constitutes a prophet. He focuses in his own mind the thought of the age in which he is living and gives it back to mankind in concrete form. Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, and Luther may be instanced as the great waves that stood up above their fellows (with a probable lapse of five hundred years between them). Always the wave that is backed by the greatest purity and the noblest character is what breaks upon the world as a movement of social reform (ibid.).

The prophet or world teacher inspires a group of disciples who spread the master's message among a 'creative minority'. The prophet and his disciples function something like a hu-

mongous hydroelectric dam. The waters of an ordinary river do not have much power apart from their use in irrigation and transport. But when the waters flow through the giant turbines of a hydroelectric dam, they produce tremendous energy in the form of electricity. In a similar way, the prophet or avatara generates universal spiritual ideas and, by applying them in his own life through his sadhana, imparts tremendous power to those ideas and gives them to the world as his message. Like high tension power lines, which carry electricity from the power plant to various parts of the country, the disciples of the prophet serve as carriers of his message and as the main channel for the flow of his power to the common people.

Swamiji has stated that universal, epochal thought waves occur approximately every five hundred years. This means a world teacher or prophet or incarnation appears on the world scene once in five centuries or so. The history of world religions shows that this, to a great extent, is true. According to Swamiji, Sri Ramakrishna is the latest of these generators of universal thought waves. Swamiji said: 'Once again in our day there is a vibration of the waves of thought and the central idea is that of the Immanent God, and this is everywhere cropping up in every form and every sect (ibid.).

The Epochal 'New Man'

Sri Ramakrishna is regarded as the avatara of the modern age by millions of people. This popular adoration is not the result of any propaganda. There are thousands of homes, some even in the most unlikely places, in which Sri Ramakrishna is worshipped by people who know little about him. In spite of his homely appearance, there is something in his personality that radiates divinity. Nearly a century ago a senior monk of our Order once showed a photograph of Sri Rama-

The world could not bear a second birth like that of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, in five hundred years. The mass of thought that he has left, has first to be transformed into experience; the spiritual energy given forth has to be converted into achievement. Until this is done, what right have we to ask for more? What could we do with more?

—Sri Aurobindo Ghosh,
Prabuddha Bharata, 41/2, 144

krishna to Sri Narayan Guru, the great saint and social reformer of Kerala, and asked him, 'What do you think of this person?' After looking at the picture intently for a minute or two the Guru replied, 'If Brahman be given a Form, it would be like this'. He then asked the swami whose picture it was, and was immensely pleased to know that it was the picture of the guru of Swami Vivekananda.

For a person who was to be regarded as the modern incarnation, Sri Ramakrishna was born in a most favourable place, time, and culture. It is doubtful whether there was any better part of the globe for an avatara to be born in than India and, more particularly, Bengal. India is, in the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'the land where humanity has attained the highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and of spirituality' (3.105). The Indian ethos provides the most favourable soil for saintliness and spirituality to flourish, flower, and fructify. This is the land where saints, sages, and spiritual teachers are venerated as gods. Hinduism is a vast conglomeration of sects, cults, beliefs, philosophies, practices, and traditions and is an inexhaustible storehouse of vast spiritual power accumulated by thousands of rishis,

yogis, munis, jnanis, bhaktas, monks, lay people, saints, and sages through several millennia. The whole of this vast spiritual power was available to the new avatara to draw upon.

Bengali society, culture, and ethos were particularly favourable to the advent of a new avatara. The cultural homogeneity of Bengali society cutting across caste barriers, the great work of liberalizing social attitudes and uplifting the masses carried on by Sri Chaitanya and his followers, the *kula-guru*, hereditary system of spiritual instruction, the popularization of congregational singing, *sankīrtan*, and of meditation and yogic practices by tantric followers among the masses, the worship of God as the Mother of the universe, mother-centred family life—all these factors had prepared the socio-cultural ambience for the work of the avatara of the age. Moreover, since Calcutta was the capital of the then British India, the awakening of the Indian mind consequent upon the impact of Western culture began in Bengal, and this had made the minds of people more receptive to new ideas of religious harmony, universalism, and divinity of humankind taught by Sri Ramakrishna.

Naturally endowed with many extraordinary qualities and capacities, Sri Ramakrishna was out from the ordinary run of people. From his childhood, he seemed to have an awareness of his inherent divine nature and the uniqueness of his personality; he also had the awareness that he was born with a great mission in life. This awareness made him think independently and not follow the herd, while maintaining at the same time an uncompromising adherence to truth all through his life. Since he knew the limitations of secular knowledge, he refused to have more than two or three years of formal schooling. He had a sharp intellect, gigantic willpower, equality of vision, equanimity of mind, unconditional love for all, deep compas-

sion for suffering people, openness to diverse views, and an attitude of harmony and acceptance towards life.

There are other features that make Sri Ramakrishna stand out even among the elite group of prophets and avatars. One of these is the superhuman spiritual power that he displayed in following the different spiritual paths of different Hindu sects and different world religions. Normally, all spiritual persons, including great prophets, confine themselves to their own unique spiritual paths discovered or traversed by them. But Sri Ramakrishna not only followed different spiritual paths with ease, he also attained peak after peak of transcendental experience in each path with incredible rapidity. This has no parallel in hagiography. About this extraordinary spiritual feat, Sri Aurobindo writes:

In the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we see a colossal spiritual capacity, first driving straight to the divine realisation, taking, as it were, the kingdom of heaven by violence, and then seizing upon one Yogic method after another and extracting the substance out of it with an incredible rapidity, always to return to the heart of the whole matter, the realisation and possession of God by the power of love, by the extension of inborn spirituality into various experience and by the spontaneous play of an intuitive knowledge. *Such an example cannot be generalised.*³

The other extraordinary feature of Sri Ramakrishna's personality was the tremendous, unprecedented, and unparalleled degree of intensity of love for God that he displayed in his life. After Chaitanya Mahaprabhu the world has never seen such an unimaginable intensity of thirst for the experience of God. It was this spiritual thirst that made him follow different pathways to God.

Yet another unique feature seen in the later life of Sri Ramakrishna was the ease and facility with which he could frequently ascend to the superconscious state of communion with God, known as *bhāva samadhi*, thereby losing consciousness of the external world even in the midst of people.

One unique aspect of the lives of almost all prophets and incarnations of God is their great charisma to draw a group of disciples, who are generally found to be men of high spiritual calibre, and inspire lifelong allegiance and loyalty in them. After the passing away of the prophet, his disciples serve as his apostles or messengers, interpreting and carrying his message to people living in nearby and far off places. Sri Ramakrishna had sixteen young disciples whom he trained from their early youth and who later formed a monastic order in his name. He had several enlightened householder disciples as well. The fore-

most of his disciples was Narendra, who spread his master's message in different parts of India and the world.

The discipleship of Swami Vivekananda was Sri Ramakrishna's greatest asset. No other prophet in human history ever had such a brilliant, learned, loving, devoted, multi-faceted genius and visionary like Swami Vivekananda as his disciple. However, it is to be noted here that though Narendra accepted Sri Ramakrishna as his guru at the impressionable age of eighteen, he had difficulty in accepting Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara till Sri Ramakrishna's last days on earth. One day during his terminal illness at Cossipore, Sri Ramakrishna told Narendra, 'Some people call me God'. Narendra told him bluntly, 'Let a thousand people call you God, but I will certainly not call you God as long as I do not know it to be true.'⁴ Later on Narendra must have obtained incontrovertible proof of



the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna through some direct transcendental experience, which he never divulged to anybody. This is clear from the fact that the same Sri Ramakrishna whom he doubted to be an avatara was later described by him as '*Jrmbhita yuga īśvara, jagadīśvara*; God of the new age, God of the world' and as '*avatāravarīṣṭha*; the greatest of all incarnations' in sublime hymns and songs that are now sung in hundreds of homes and ashramas.

What was the reason behind Narendra's hesitation in accepting Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara? It should be pointed out in this context that the avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna was not a dogma propounded by his disciples. Long before the disciples started gathering around him, he had been openly declared to be the new avatara by several eminent scholars like Vaishnavacharan, Narayan Sastri, Gauri Pandit of Indesh, and others. Narendra knew all this, he was also aware of the supernatural events in the Great Master's life. One day the well-known Brahmo Samaj leader Vijaykrishna Goswami had a vision of Sri Ramakrishna in Dhaka, and by actually touching the figure he was seeing, he checked that it was not an illusion. Later, when he narrated the event before Sri Ramakrishna at Cossipore in Calcutta, Narendra was also present and said, 'I too have seen him many times. How can I say I do not believe your words?' (885).⁵

From the above facts it is reasonable to assume that the real cause behind Narendra's hesitation was that he was trying to understand the deeper implications of the avatara doctrine and wanted to have certitude regarding the truth of it. Whereas the other disciples thought of Sri Ramakrishna in relation to their own personal salvation, Narendra thought of him in relation to the implications of avatarahood for Hinduism as a whole and for the well-being of humanity.

However, once he gained the certitude he was seeking, Narendra used his insights to work out the religious, national, and global implications of Sri Ramakrishna's avatarahood. One of the great contributions Swami Vivekananda made to the modern world was his new interpretation of the concept of avatara and his exposition of the significance of Sri Ramakrishna's unique life.

In this regard Swamiji's work was somewhat similar to that of St Paul. St Paul did not attempt to expound the teachings of Jesus, of which there is hardly any mention in his epistles; his great work was to expound the significance of Jesus's life and death as well as to give a new interpretation of the Jewish concept of Messiah, the relevance and purpose of God's incarnation. Similarly, Swamiji's main effort was not so much to explain Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, for he knew that, since they are based on the eternal truths of the spiritual realm, they had the force of a new revelation and the intrinsic power to create their own irresistible impact on the lives of millions of people.

(To be concluded)

Notes and References

1. The concept of 'meme' was introduced in 1976 by Richard Dawkins through his book *The Selfish Gene*, and was popularized by the American philosopher Daniel Dennet in 1991 through his book *Consciousness Explained*.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.57.
3. Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2005), 36. Emphasis added.
4. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 962.
5. This kind of supersensuous experience belongs to the category of what Christian mystics call 'corporeal vision'.

Understanding Bhāvamukha: Sri Ramakrishna's Unique State of Consciousness

Swami Atmapriyananda

IN HIS FAMOUS ESSAY TITLED 'Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna', Swami Vivekananda writes:

Truth is of two kinds: (1) that which is cognisable by the five ordinary senses of man, and by reasonings based thereon; (2) that which is cognisable by the subtle, supersensuous power of Yoga.

Knowledge acquired by the first means is called science; and knowledge acquired by the second is called the Vedas. ...

The person in whom this supersensuous power is manifested is called a Rishi, and the supersensuous truths which he realises by this power are called the Vedas.

This Rishihood, this power of supersensuous perception of the Vedas, is real religion. And so long as this does not develop in the life of an initiate, so long is religion a mere empty word to him, and it is to be understood that he has not taken yet the first step in religion.¹

The Indian spiritual tradition is an authentic record of the realizations of rishis constantly engaged in Consciousness research. The truths that they actually 'saw', not through the eyes or the senses but through supersensuous perception, form a dynamic and vibrant body of knowledge

created through their exploration and insight into the mystery of Consciousness. This river of rich spiritual tradition, set in motion by the rishis ages ago, is flowing unhindered in a thousand streams over the millennia through a perennial chain of teacher-disciple succession, *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, coming down to the present age of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

'Remain in Bhāvamukha'

Bhāvamukha is one of Sri Ramakrishna's unique contributions to the Indian spiritual tradition. Sri Ramakrishna, who lived and moved about soaked in God-consciousness, did not 'conceptualize' *bhāvamukha* as a philosophical principle, for his mind was too absorbed in the Divine to attempt to transform any spiritual realization into a 'concept'. The term *bhāvamukha* arose from three spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna, perhaps unparalleled in the Indian spiritual tradition, and later on was conceptualized as a unique philosophical principle by one of his monastic disciples, Swami Saradananda, the author of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*—a remarkable interpretive treatise on Sri Ramakrishna's exploratory adventures in the amazing expanse of super-consciousness.²

Sri Ramakrishna was commanded by the Supreme Being, whom he called the Divine Mother Kali, to 'remain in *bhāvamukha*'—an experience that he had a couple of times during

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the period of his superhuman spiritual struggles, and a third time almost at the culmination of his twelve years of intense sadhana. Interestingly, this unique spiritual experience was triggered by the mental disturbance that the childlike Sri Ramakrishna, innocence incarnate that he was, felt at the words of his cousin Haladhari. Haladhari, who was arrogant, snobbish, and proud of his scholarship, quoted the scriptures to say that Sri Ramakrishna's visions of gods and goddesses were nothing but a fancy, resulting from a frenzied brain. Sri Ramakrishna was visibly perturbed. Like a child, he ran to his Divine Mother Bhavatarini Kali and piteously implored her to tell him about the veracity of his visions. What the divine response was is best described in Sri Ramakrishna's own words:

I thought that the divine visions that I had had during ecstasy and the commands I had received were all false. The Mother must have cheated me! I was extremely upset. Piqued, I cried to the Mother: 'Mother, I am unlettered and ignorant. Why have You cheated me in this way? I couldn't control myself, and kept crying. I was in a room of the *kuthi* [bungalow]. After a while a smoke-like mist arose from the floor and covered some space before me. Then I saw within it a golden-complexioned, living, calm face with long flowing beard. That figure looked at me intently and said in a deep voice: 'My child, you remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha!' After repeating this three times, the form slowly dissolved into the mist, then that mist also disappeared. This vision reassured me.³

On another occasion he again felt terribly perturbed remembering those words of Haladhari. 'While performing worship in the temple,' he narrated later, 'I cried and pressed the Mother to solve that matter. At that time the Mother, in the guise of a woman known as "Rati's mother",

appeared beside the consecrated pitcher [installed in front of the image] and told me: "You remain in bhavamukha!"' (234). On a third occasion, when Sri Ramakrishna had remained in the *nirvikalpa* plane of consciousness, merged in the absolute Brahman for nearly six months at a stretch—after the peripatetic teacher Tota Puri had imparted the Vedantic knowledge and left Dakshineswar—he heard the incorporeal voice of the Divine Mother speaking in his heart of hearts: 'You remain in Bhavamukha' (ibid.).

Bhāvamukha and Vijñāna

There is another concept from the Indian spiritual tradition to which Sri Ramakrishna provides fresh insightful meanings: *vijñāna*. Vedanta commonly speaks about an *ajñānī*, ignorant person, and a *jñānī*, one who has attained the knowledge of the supreme Reality. Besides these two, Sri Ramakrishna highlights the state of the *vijñānī*. An *ajñānī* is one who takes this unreal world of relativity to be real. A *jñānī* is one who has realized the ephemeral nature of the world, and equating ephemerality with unreality sees the world of relativity to be unreal like a dream. Traditional Vedanta calls this person a *brahma-vid*, knower of Brahman. Some Vedantins speak of gradations amongst knowers of Brahman: *brahma-vid-vara*, *brahma-vid-varīyān*, and *brahma-vid-variṣṭha*. In the case of the *brahma-vid-variṣṭha*, the highest type of *jñānī*, there is no question of seeing the world of relativity at all, just as a person in deep sleep sees nothing. He remains absorbed in the supreme Brahman, and perceiving nothing else becomes merged in it: '*Brahma-veda brahmaiva bhavati*; a knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.'

Sri Ramakrishna adds a new category into the classes of *brahma-jñānīs*: the *vijñānī*. A *vijñānī*, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is one who having attained *pūrṇa jñāna*, full knowledge of Brah-

man, emerges from this state of complete absorption in the Supreme—by divine will—for the good of the world, which for a *viññānī* stands transformed as the *līlā*, divine play, of supreme Consciousness. For a *viññānī*, the world is God's *līlā*, the play of the supreme Consciousness in the relative existence. Under a divine command, and out of great compassion and unbounded love for all beings, the *viññānī* engages in the welfare of all beings: *sarva-bhuta-hite-rataḥ*. While a *jñānī* rejects the world—considering it to be unreal, like a mirage or a dream—a *viññānī* sees the world transformed into a luminous and joyous reality saturated with divine bliss. From a philosophical point of view, it may be said that a *jñānī* remains tuned to the *sat* and *cit* aspects of *sat-cit-ānanda*, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss, while a *viññānī*, by remaining tuned to the *ānanda* aspect of Brahman, lives immersed in supreme joy and rejoices, *ramate*, is fulfilled, *tripto bhavati*, and sports, *krīḍati*, in Brahman.

The Bhagavadgita and the Upanishads may be said to describe the state of a *viññānī*, rather than that of a *jñānī*, through such terms as *ātma-rata*, *ātma-tripta*, *ātma-santusta*, and *ātma-krīḍa*, and others. Such a *viññānī*, who has gone beyond the *sat* and *cit* aspects of Brahman and has realized the *ānanda* aspect, sees the world not as unreal, *mithyā*—as is the case with a *jñānī*—but as the divine play of the supreme Consciousness, with the full manifestation of the *ānanda* aspect of Brahman subsuming and overwhelming the *sat* and *cit* aspects. The *viññānī* perceives the *nitya*—absolute, transcendent—aspect of the supreme Reality as *viññāna-ghana-ekarasa*, an unbroken mass of awareness, and also perceives the *līlā* aspect of the same Reality as the infilling and overflowing bliss that interpenetrates and saturates, *otaprota*, all that exists. This dual perception of the *nitya* and *līlā* aspects of the supreme Reality, realized as one's own inner Self, Atman,

in the stillness of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and as an all-pervading awareness and joy in the divine sport of life, is the state of *bhāvamukha*. The state of *viññāna* as explicated by Sri Ramakrishna is manifest in the avatars, divine incarnations. The avatars, remaining in the state of *bhāvamukha*, express through their lives, teachings, and the tradition they initiate and head the *ānanda* aspect of Reality, the infinite bliss of God. Jesus Christ's exhortation to 'rejoice and be exceedingly glad' points to this *ānanda* aspect of God.

Philosophically speaking, the *viññānī*'s perception represents a paradigm shift. The *viññānī* sees the supreme Reality, Brahman, as *nitya*—transcendent, absolute, impersonal, and infinite; and simultaneously realizes the same supreme Reality as *līlā*—the immanent and all-pervading Consciousness, the indwelling Reality of all beings, *antaryāmin*, that interpenetrates and saturates the universe through and through. The world of relativity is no longer rejected as *mithyā*, but is seen as *līlā*, as *ānanda-svarūpa*, of the nature of bliss. Thus, the new paradigm of the *viññānī* is *nitya-līlā*, which replaces the traditional *jñānī*'s paradigm of *satya-mithyā*. The famous dictum '*brahma satyaṁ jagat mithyā*; Brahman is real, the world unreal' is transformed into '*Brahma nityaṁ jagat līlā*; Brahman is eternal, the world (its) sport'. In this last assertion the oneness and transcendence of Brahman, as declared in the Advaita philosophy, is not compromised. The manifoldness and immanence of Brahman, emphasized in the Dvaita schools, is also not rejected. Both are perceived as being subsumed into a totality where Reality is perceived as the 'one' as well as the 'many'—not the 'many' seen in the unawakened state of an *ajñānī*, but the 'many' seen through the eyes of a *viññānī*, a transformed world of manifoldness through which the 'one' is playing, as it were, its explicable divine sport as the 'many'.

A *jñānī* merging into and becoming absorbed and lost in the infinitude of the Advaita experience of Brahman, now emerges as a *viññānī* in the finite world of relativity, which stands transformed before his vision as the manifestation of the same Brahman. This transformed vision of relativity and duality, as it were, ‘goes beyond’ the non-dual Advaita experience without any contradiction between the two. This perhaps is the meaning of Sri Ramakrishna’s statement: ‘The spiritual experiences of this place (*meaning himself*) have surpassed even the Vedas and Vedānta’ (380). If one seeks a logical explanation of how a *viññānī* emerges from the state of complete absorption in the absolute and infinite Brahman, one has to conclude that such a logical formulation is impossible. This is the mystery of the divine incarnation, *avatāra-tattva*, which defies all logic, as far as our limited minds go. Though this state defies logic, it does not contradict it; in this sense it is not a mystery, it is something mystical. Swami Tapasyananda once told the present author that Sri Ramakrishna’s concept of the *viññānī* abiding in *bhāvamukha*, may be called ‘alogical mysticism’, for it is non-logical without being illogical; and it can only be understood, if at all, through a divinely blessed supersensory perception.

The Ultimate Reality as Impersonal-Personal

Sri Ramakrishna realized the ultimate Reality as both impersonal and personal, both formless and with form, both transcendent and immanent. He has used wonderful illustrations in his own inimitable style to describe this realization. One of his teachings—which are nothing but divine music—about the ultimate Reality is as follows: Do not put any limitation on the infinitude of the supreme Reality. It is wrong to affirm that God can be formless and

not with form, that God can be transcendent and not immanent, impersonal and not personal. Different spiritual aspirants realize the infinite and absolute Reality in innumerable ways, and none has the right to say that this or that alone is ‘the’ right perception of Reality. Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘Yes, God has form and He is formless too. Further, He is beyond both form and formlessness. No one can limit Him.’⁴ He illustrates the impossibility of the limited human mind attempting to comprehend the infinitude of the supreme Reality with the imagery of an ant going to a sugar hill, picking up a grain of sugar to carry home, and imagining that it can carry the whole hill back the next time round! (102). Such is the predicament of the human intellect.

Philosophically speaking, Vedānta posits two forms of Brahman: *sopādhika brahma*, Brahman associated with *upādhis*, limiting adjuncts; and *nirupādhika brahma*, Brahman devoid of any *upādhi*. They are also called *saguṇa brahma*, Brahman with attributes, and *nirguṇa brahma*, Brahman without attributes. Since these two forms of Brahman are but aspects of the same Reality, they are not different. Acharya Shankara speaks of these two forms of Brahman and their non-difference as follows:

Dvirūpaṁ hi brahmāvagamyate nāma-rūpa-vikāra-bhedopādhi-viśiṣṭaṁ tad-viparītaṁ ca sarvopādhi-vivarjitam. ... Evam-ekam-āpi brahmāpekṣitopādhi-sambandhaṁ nirastopādhi-sambandhaṁ copāśyātvena jñeyātvena ca vedānteṣu upadiśyate.

Brahman, verily, is known to be of two forms: that which is qualified by the adjunct or difference caused by the modifications of name and form, and that which, on the contrary, is devoid of all adjuncts. ... Although Brahman is one, it is taught in the Vedāntic texts as that which is to be meditated upon [or worshipped] as being

related to assumed adjuncts, and as that to be realized [or known] as being devoid of any relation to adjuncts.⁵

Acharya Shankara calls the *saguna* aspect of Brahman as *upāsya-brahma*, capable of being worshipped or meditated upon. On the other hand, the *nirguna* aspect of Brahman is *jñeya-brahma*, to be realized or known as one's own Self, and not worshipped as different from oneself. The acharya dismisses the differences as merely in name:

*Eko hy-ayam-ātmā nāma-mātra-bhedena
bahudhābhidyata iti.*

The one Self, indeed, is designated differently on account of the difference in mere name (1.4.22).

Sri Ramakrishna gives a striking example to illustrate the non-difference of God without form and God with form:

Look, God is with form and again formless. Who knows what else He is besides these? Do you know what God with form is like? It is like water and ice. When water freezes, it becomes ice—which inside and outside is water only. Ice is nothing but water. But look, water does not have any particular form, whereas ice does. Similarly, through the cooling influence of the devotee's love the ocean of the indivisible Sat-chidananda freezes and takes various forms, as does ice.⁶

And again:

No one can say with finality that God is only 'this' and nothing else. He is formless, and again He has forms. For the bhakta He assumes forms. But He is formless for the jñāni, that is, for him who looks on the world as a mere dream. ...

Think of Brahman, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, as a shoreless ocean. Through the cooling influence, as it were, of the bhakta's

love, the water has frozen at places into blocks of ice. In other words, God now and then assumes various forms for His lovers and reveals Himself to them as a Person. But with the rising of the sun of Knowledge, the blocks of ice melt. Then one doesn't feel any more that God is a Person, nor does one see God's forms. What He is cannot be described. Who will describe Him? He who would do so disappears. He cannot find his 'I' any more.⁷

Sri Ramakrishna was also fond of comparing a sadhaka, spiritual aspirant, who ventures to describe God to a salt doll that went to measure the depth of the ocean. It dissolved in and became one with the ocean. Who then would remain as the individual to come back and give a description of the ocean?

Yogodyan, 1898. Rambabu, Girishbabu, Akshaybabu, Haramohanbabu, Kalipadababu, and Manomohanbabu were present. Three or four of us were also present. Suddenly, one person said, 'Those who had the good fortune to come to Sri Ramakrishna are all spiritual aspirants and pure souls.' Monomohanbabu said, 'I cannot accept that. If that criterion were there in Sri Ramakrishna's grammar, what would have been our plight? When we came to him our condition was just like these (pointing to the youth nearby). We had no faith, no dedication, no definite goal, and no longing to attain a goal. We did not know what sense control was. We have learnt from our experience that these qualities do not come from the beginning. They came one by one afterwards because of his mercy. After holding on to him through his grace, we developed faith in God, dedication, devotion, and whatever else. We did not get those qualities through our own effort. We got them through his grace.'

—Bhakta Manomohan, 227

Nitya and Līlā:

Aspects of the Same Reality

Conditioned as we are by names and forms—our bodies to be counted first among these—our spiritual ascent to the attributeless Brahman, *nirupādhika nirguṇa brahma*, should perforce be through Brahman with attributes and with qualities, *sopādhika saguṇa brahma*. The realization of the transcendental Reality, *nirguṇa brahma*, is through the realization of the *saguṇa brahma* that interpenetrates the world of names and forms we live in. Swami Vivekananda observes: ‘The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative.’⁸ Swami Yatiswarananda has called it one of the ‘laws of spiritual life’: ‘The realization of the Absolute—the transcendental Reality—lies always through the realization of the immanent divine Principle. The holy Personality (*Iṣṭa Devatā*) is a manifestation of this divine Principle.’⁹

Sri Ramakrishna said that the same Satchidananda Brahman of the Vedānta tradition is Satchidananda Krishna of the Vaiṣṇava tradition as well as Satchidananda Kali of the tantra tradition. *Saguṇa brahma*, called Ishvara or Divine Mother Kali, is the same Brahman conceived of as with attributes and qualities. As a corollary we could argue that if, from the point of view of Brahman, Ishvara or Kali could be called the *saguṇa* aspect of Brahman, then, by the same logic, from the perspective of Ishvara or Kali, Brahman should be the *nirguṇa* aspect of Kali. Thus, from his realizations, Sri Ramakrishna arrived at what can be put in simple equations: Kali = *saguṇa* Brahman; Brahman = *nirguṇa* Kali.

As pointed out above, the realization of Brahman, the transcendent principle, is first through the realization of the immanent principle. Sri Ramakrishna says, ‘Pray to Brahman with attributes, who listens to your prayers, and He Him-

self will give you full Knowledge of Brahman; for that which is Brahman with attributes is verily Brahman without attributes, that which is Brahman is verily Shakti. One realizes this non-duality after the attainment of Perfect Knowledge. The Divine Mother gives Her devotee Brahmajnana too.’¹⁰ The uncompromising Advaitic text *Avadhuta Gita* begins with the following statement: ‘*Īśvarānugrahād-eva puṁsām-advaita-vāsanā*; aspiration for the Advaitic realization dawns in the aspirant’s heart *only* by divine grace, by the compassion and blessings of Ishvara.’

Einstein’s theory of relativity speaks of frames of reference, a concept that could be used with telling effect in the present context. If Brahman is chosen as the frame of reference from which to look at Reality, Shakti is the *saguṇa* aspect of Brahman. Brahman is the transcendent and absolute Reality, while Shakti is the immanent aspect interpenetrating the relative world of existence. On the other hand, if Shakti is chosen as the frame of reference, then Brahman becomes the *nirguṇa* or transcendent aspect of Shakti. From the Brahman frame, the world of relativity—of names and forms, including the jivas, beings, and ultimately Ishvara—appear unreal, because from that frame there is only one absolute transcendent Reality in which the triad of *jīva-jagat-īśvara* is sublated. From the Brahman frame, therefore, Brahman appears as the one Reality, *brahma satyam*, and the world of relativity appears unreal, *jagat mithyā*, for it has no independent existence apart from Brahman.

However, a new vision appears when, after attaining the Absolute, one looks at Reality from the Shakti or Ishvara frame—it is the immanent Reality seen as sporting and playing as innumerable names and forms, which in fact derive their reality and existence from the Absolute. They appear as the *līlā*, divine sport, of the transcendent

Absolute, the *nitya*. Why and how the *nitya* 'chooses' to play its divine sport as the *līlā* is a question that cannot be logically formulated with regard to the Absolute, as Swami Vivekananda once pointed out in answer to a similar question by a group of pundits in Madras: 'Questions of how, why, or wherefore relate to the manifested world, and not to the Unmanifested, which is above all change and causation, and therefore above all relation to the changing universe. ... The question, therefore, is not one which can be reasonably put. Put a proper question ... and I will answer.'¹¹ This is the paradigm shift from *satya-mithyā* to *nitya-līlā* spoken of in the earlier section.

Now, the Brahman frame is no frame at all, there being no question of observation or perception of Reality, the observer or the perceiver himself having become one with Brahman, and the *tripuṭi*, triad, of *jñātā-jñeya-jñāna*, knower-known-knowledge, having vanished—the salt doll having got dissolved in the ocean. All observation, transaction, and perception is possible only in the Shakti frame; and the only paradigm that accommodates the reality of the relative world as *līlā*, rooted in and derived from the reality of Brahman, is the paradigm of *nitya-līlā* emphasized by Sri Ramakrishna. Advaita is not compromised, and the Dvaita reality is accepted as the *līlā* aspect of the same Reality, *nitya*. *Līlā* being the *ānanda* aspect of Brahman, life in the relative world is one of great joy—the joyous play of the *nitya* as *līlā*. This is the *parā-bhakti*, supreme love, spoken of in the very last chapter of the Gita,¹² and attained 'after' the fullness of *brahma-jñāna*, as distinguished from the bhakti mentioned in the Gita as leading to *brahma-jñāna* (14.26). In *vijñāna*, jñana and bhakti are blended. This beautiful blend then issues out in action, karma—the whole of life being transformed into one divine *līlā*, with the full

realization of the *nitya* intact. The following well-known hymn composed by Swami Vivekananda on Sri Ramakrishna beautifully epitomizes this synthesis:

*Advaya-tattva-samāhita-cittam
projjvala-bhakti-patāvṛta-vṛttam;
Karma-kalevaram-adbhuta-ceṣṭam
yāmi gurum śaraṇam bhava-vaidyam.*

I take refuge in that guru, the physician for curing the disease of samsara (relative existence) whose mind is absorbed in the absolute non-dual Consciousness, who is covered with the effulgent envelope of bhakti, who is wonderfully active [in redeeming beings] through his [divine] body engaged in karma.¹³

(To be concluded)

Notes and References

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 6.181.
2. The text has two English translations: *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2010), and *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003).
3. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 233.
4. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 192.
5. Shankaracharya's commentary on *Brahma Sutra*, I.I.II.
6. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 436.
7. *Gospel*, 148.
8. *Complete Works*, I.17.
9. Swami Yatiswarananda, *Meditation and Spiritual Life* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2009), x–xi.
10. *Gospel*, 636.
11. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 2.197.
12. *Bhagavadgita*, 18.54.
13. See *Complete Works*, 8.174.

Sri Ramakrishna on Himself

Compiled by Mohit Ranjan Das

Ancestry and Childhood

‘WHEN MY FATHER WALKED along the lanes of the village wearing his wooden sandals, the shopkeepers would stand up out of respect and say, “There he comes!” When he bathed in the Haldarpukur, the villagers would not have the courage to get into the water. Before bathing they would inquire if he had finished his bath.

‘When my father chanted the name of Raghuvir, his chest would turn crimson. This also happened to me. When I saw the cows at Vrindavan returning from the pasture, I was transported into a divine mood and my body became red.’¹

‘My mother was an embodiment of simplicity. She was not worldly-wise at all; she did not even know how to count money. She was not clever enough to keep confidences when necessary. She would divulge whatever was in her mind to everyone. That is why people called her “loose-lipped”. She was fond of feeding people.’²

‘Once my father went to Gaya. There Raghuvir said to him in a dream, “I shall be born as your son.” Thereupon my father said to Him: “O Lord, I am a poor brahmin. How shall I be able to serve You?” “Don’t worry about it”, Raghuvir replied. “It will be taken care of.”’³

‘I was born on the second day of the bright fortnight of the moon. My horoscope shows the positions of the sun, the moon, and Mercury at

the time of my birth. There are not many more details’ (813).

‘During my younger days the men and women of Kamarpukur were equally fond of me. They loved to hear me sing. I could imitate other people’s gestures and conversation, and I used to entertain them that way. The women would put aside things for me to eat. No one distrusted me. Everybody took me in as one of the family.

‘But I was like a happy pigeon. I used to frequent only happy families. I would run away from a place where I saw misery and suffering.

‘One or two young boys of the village were my close friends. I was very intimate with some of them; but now they are totally immersed in worldliness. A few of them visit me here now and then and say, “Goodness! He seems to be just the same as he was in the village school!” While I was at school, arithmetic would throw me into confusion, but I could paint very well and could also model small images of the deities’ (239–40).

‘While young, I could model small images of deities. Lord Krishna, with flute in his hand. In this way, I could model images of various gods and goddesses. I then sold them at the price of five or six annas. ... Also, I used to draw pictures. I used to model dolls with machinery for the movement of their hands and legs. Many times, the technicians of the Ras festival came to me to know proper styles. ... I also knew the work of bricks.’⁴

‘I loved to visit the free eating-places maintained for holy men and the poor, and would watch them for hours. I loved to hear the read-

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ing of sacred books such as the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavata*. If the readers had any affectations, I could easily imitate them and would entertain others with my mimicry.’⁵

‘During my boyhood I could understand what the sadhus read at the Lahas’ house at Kamarpukur, although I would miss a little here and there. If a pundit speaks to me in Sanskrit I can follow him, but I cannot speak it myself’ (407).

‘In that part of the country [Kamarpukur] children are given puffed rice to eat from small baskets. Those who are poor and have no baskets eat from the corner of a cloth. Boys go out to play on the roads or in the fields carrying puffed rice either in a basket or in the corner of a cloth. It was June or July. I was then six or seven years old. One morning I took some puffed rice in a small basket and was eating it as I walked along the narrow ridges of the rice fields. In one part of the sky a beautiful black cloud appeared, heavy with rain. I was watching it and eating the puffed rice. Very soon the cloud covered almost the whole sky. Then a flock of cranes came flying, white as milk against the black cloud. It was so beautiful that I became absorbed in the sight; I lost consciousness of everything outside of myself. I fell down, and the puffed rice was scattered over the ground. I cannot say how long I was in that state. Some people saw this and carried me home. That was the first time I lost external consciousness due to ecstasy.’⁶

First Vision of the Divine Mother

‘Once, sitting on the bank of the Ganges near the Panchavati, holding a rupee in one hand and clay in the other, I discriminated, “The rupee is the clay—the clay is verily the rupee, and the rupee is verily the clay”, and then threw the rupee into the river. But I was a little frightened. “How foolish of me to offend the goddess of fortune!” I thought. “What shall I do if she doesn’t provide

me with food any more?” ... I said to the goddess, “Mother, may you dwell in my heart.”’⁷

‘Ramprasad and other devotees had the vision of the Divine Mother. One can definitely see Her. Why can’t I? ... Mother, You showed Yourself to Ramprasad. Why won’t You show Yourself to me? I don’t want wealth, friends and family, or objects of enjoyment. Please reveal Yourself to me.’⁸

‘Mother, I have been praying to You so long! Why don’t You listen to me? You showed Yourself to Ramprasad. Why won’t You show Yourself to me? ...

‘There was an unbearable pain in my heart because I could not have a vision of Mother. Just as a man wrings out a towel with all his strength to get the water out of it, so I felt as if my heart were being wrung out. I began to think I should never see Mother. I was dying of despair. In my agony, I asked myself: “What’s the use of living this life?” Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that

Woolen coat worn by Sri Ramakrishna



hangs in the Mother's shrine. I decided to end my life then and there. Like a madman, I ran to the sword and seized it. Then I had a marvellous vision of the Mother and fell down unconscious. Afterwards what happened in the external world, or how that day and the next passed, I don't know. But within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss that I had never before experienced, and I felt the immediate presence of the Divine Mother. ... It was as if the room, doors, temple, and everything else vanished together; as if there were nothing anywhere! And what I saw was an infinite shoreless ocean of light; that ocean was consciousness. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves, one after another, coming towards me to swallow me up. They were madly rushing towards me from all sides, with a terrific noise' (212).

God-intoxicated State

'There is an image of Bhairava [a form of Shiva] in meditation on the parapet of the natmandir in front of the Kali temple. While going to the temple to meditate, I would point to that image and tell my mind, "You must meditate on the Mother like that motionless statue". No sooner did I sit down to meditate than I would hear clattering sounds in all of my joints, beginning in my legs. It was as if someone inside me were turning keys to lock me up, joint by joint. I was powerless to move my body or change my posture, even slightly. I couldn't stop meditating, or leave the temple, or do anything else I wanted. I was forced to sit in that posture until my joints began clattering again and were unlocked, this time beginning at my neck and ending in my legs' (214).

'I put my hand near the Mother's nostrils and felt that She was actually breathing. At night I watched carefully, but in the lamplight I could never see Her shadow on the temple wall. From my room I would hear Mother running upstairs,

as merry as a little girl, with Her anklets jingling. I would rush outside to see if this was true. And there She would be standing on the veranda of the second floor of the temple, with Her hair blowing in the breeze. Sometimes She would look towards Calcutta and sometimes towards the Ganges' (216).

'When I performed spiritual disciplines and worship according to scriptural directions, I used to think that the *papa-purusha* [evil spirit] within me had been burnt. Who knew then that a *papa-purusha* dwells in every human body, and that it could be truly burnt and destroyed? In the beginning of sadhana I felt a burning sensation in my body. I thought, "What kind of disease is this?" Gradually it increased in severity until it became unbearable. I applied various medicated oils, but to no avail. Later on, I was seated in the Panchavati one day when suddenly I saw a terrible-looking, red-eyed man of black complexion come out of this body ... and begin to stumble about in front of me like a drunkard. The next moment I saw a handsome person emerge from this body, wearing an ochre cloth and holding a trident in his hand. He vehemently attacked the terrible person and killed him, and from that point on the burning sensation diminished. Prior to this I had suffered from that burning continually for six months' (220).

'At one time Rani Rasmani was staying in the temple garden. She came to the shrine of the Divine Mother, as she frequently did when I worshipped Kali, and asked me to sing a song or two. On this occasion, while I was singing, I noticed she was sorting the flowers for worship absent-mindedly. At once I slapped her on the cheeks. She became quite embarrassed and sat there with folded hands.

'Alarmed at this state of mind myself, I said to my cousin Haladhari: "Just see my nature! How can I get rid of it?" After praying to the Divine

Mother for some time with great yearning, I was able to shake off this habit.’⁹

‘At first I practised sadhana in the Panchavati. I made a grove of tulsi-plants and used to sit inside it and meditate. Sometimes I cried with a longing Heart, “Mother! Mother!” Or again, “Rama! Rama!”’ (543).

‘As I was perfectly unmindful of cleaning the body at that time, the hairs grew long and got matted of themselves, being smeared with dirt and dust. When I used to sit in meditation, the body used to become stiff and motionless like a stock through intense concentration of mind, and birds, taking it to be an inert substance, came freely, perched on the head, and pecked into the matted hair in search of food. Sometimes I used to feel so intensely the pangs of separation from God, that in great bitterness I rubbed my face on the earth; often it used to get lacerated and bleed. And in meditation, prayer and other devotional practices, the day used to fly away so quickly that I was not conscious of it. At dusk, when the approach of night was announced by the ringing of bells and the blowing of conches from the temple, I used to be reminded that the day had passed and the night had set in. With this consciousness a frenzy of despair would seize my soul, and I would throw myself on the ground and rub my face on it, crying loudly, “Mother, a day has passed; still Thou hast not appeared before me!” A gnawing anguish used to torment my soul, and those who saw me like that, writhing in agony, thought that I was suffering from colic pain.’¹⁰

‘I thought that the divine visions I had had during ecstasy and the commands I had received were all false. The Mother must have cheated me! I was extremely upset. Piqued, I cried to the Mother: “Mother, I am unlettered and ignorant. Why have You cheated me in this way?” I couldn’t control myself, and kept crying. I was in a room of the *kuthi* [bungalow]. After a while a



Cotton cap used by Sri Ramakrishna

smoke-like mist arose from the floor and covered some space before me. Then I saw within it a golden-complexioned, living, calm face with long flowing beard. That figure looked at me intently and said in a deep voice: “My child, you remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha. You remain in bhavamukha!”¹¹

‘The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The Image was Consciousness, the altar was Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the door-sill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness—all was Consciousness.

‘I found everything inside the room soaked, as it were, in Bliss—the Bliss of Satchidananda. I saw a wicked man in front of the Kali temple; but in him also I saw the Power of the Divine Mother vibrating.

‘That was why I fed a cat with the food that was to be offered to the Divine Mother. I clearly perceived that the Divine Mother Herself had become everything—even the cat. The manager of the temple garden wrote to Mathur Babu saying

that I was feeding the cat with the offering intended for the Divine Mother. But Mathur Babu had insight into the state of my mind. He wrote back to the manager: "Let him do whatever he likes. You must not say anything to him."¹²

"To my Divine Mother I prayed only for pure love. I offered flowers at Her Lotus Feet and prayed to Her: "Mother, here is Thy virtue, here is Thy vice. Take them both and grant me only pure love for Thee. Here is Thy knowledge, here is Thy ignorance. Take them both and grant me only pure love for Thee. Here is Thy purity, here is Thy impurity. Take them both, Mother, and grant me only pure love for Thee. Here is Thy dharma, here is Thy adharma. Take them both, Mother, and grant me only pure love for Thee" (138-9).



Slippers made of canvas used by Sri Ramakrishna

'I didn't ask even for knowledge or public recognition' (635). 'I could not say: "Mother, here is Thy truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both." I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth' (312).

'At Dakshineswar I was initiated into the mystery of Rama worship. I painted my forehead with a long mark and put on a string with a diamond round my neck. But after a few days I gave them up' (305).

'While repeating the name of Rama, I sometimes assumed the attitude of Hanuman and fixed a tail to the lower end of my backbone. I was in a God-intoxicated state. At that time I used to put on a silk robe and worship the Deity. What joy I experienced in that worship!' (543-4).

'By constant meditation on the glorious character of Hanuman I totally forgot my own identity. My daily life and style of food came to resemble those of Hanuman. I did not feign them; they came naturally to me. I tied my cloth round the waist, letting a portion of it hang down in the form of a tail, and jumped from place to place instead of walking. I lived on fruits and roots only, and these I preferred to eat without peeling. I passed most of the time on trees, calling out in a solemn voice, "Raghuvir!" My eyes looked restless like those of a monkey, and most wonderful of all, my coccyx enlarged by about an inch. It gradually resumed its former size after that phase of mind had passed on the completion of that course of discipline. In short, everything about me was more like a monkey than a human being.'¹³

'I saw Sita in a vision. I found that her entire mind was concentrated on Rama. She was totally indifferent to everything—her hands, her feet, her clothes, her jewels. It seemed that Rama had filled every bit of her life and she could not remain alive without Rama.'¹⁴

'A young monk exactly resembling me would come out of my body and instruct me in all matters. Sometimes when he would emerge from me I would have a little outer consciousness; at other times I would lose it altogether and become inert. I would watch his movements and listen to him speak. The Brahmani and Tota Puri only reiterated the spiritual teachings that I had heard from him. They taught me what I had already learned. It seems that they came into my life as gurus in order that respect for the injunctions of the scriptures would be maintained. No

other purpose can be found for my acceptance of Tota Puri and others as gurus.’¹⁵

Tantra Sadhana

‘I felt such a burning sensation all over my body; I used to stand in the waters of the Ganges, with my body immersed up to shoulders and a wet towel over my head all through the day, for it was insufferable. Then a Brahmana lady came and cured me of it in three days. She smeared my body with sandalwood paste and put garlands on my neck, and the pain vanished in three days.’¹⁶

‘During the day the Brahmani would travel to various places far away from the temple and collect rare articles prescribed by Tantra. At nightfall she would set up the ritual either under the bel tree or under the Panchavati, then call me to worship the Divine Mother with those articles, advising me to be absorbed in japa and meditation. But I could seldom do japa after worship because my mind was so absorbed that I would merge into samadhi while turning the rosary. I would truly experience the result of that rite, as described by the scriptures. Thus I had vision after vision and innumerable wonderful spiritual experiences. The Brahmani made me practise all the sixty-four sadhanas prescribed in the *Vishnu-kranta* section of the Tantra, one after the other. Those were difficult practices; most aspirants fall while practising them. But I got through them successfully by the Mother’s grace.

‘One night the Brahmani brought a beautiful young woman from somewhere and arranged the worship. She put the woman on the Devi’s seat, then instructed me, “My child, worship her as the goddess.” When the worship was over, she said to me: “My child, think of her as the veritable Divine Mother. Sit on her lap and practise japa wholeheartedly.” I was seized with fear, wept piteously, and said to the Divine Mother: “Mother, why do You give this command to one

who has taken refuge in You? Does Your weak child have the power to withstand such a severe trial?” As soon as I said that, my heart was filled with divine strength. Like a hypnotized person, not knowing what I was doing, I repeated the mantra, sat on the woman’s lap, and immediately went into samadhi. When I regained outer consciousness, the Brahmani said: “You have completed the rite, my child. Under such circumstances, others restrain themselves with great difficulty and finish by repeating the mantra for a very short time. But you entered samadhi, losing body-consciousness completely!” When I heard this I was reassured. With a grateful heart I bowed down to the Divine Mother again and again for enabling me to withstand the ordeal.

‘One day I saw the Brahmani cook fish in a human skull and offer it to the Divine Mother. She made me do the same and asked me to eat that fish. At her command I did so, and I had no aversion in my mind.

‘But on another day she brought a piece of rotten human flesh, offered it to the Mother, and asked me to touch it with my tongue. I was horrified with disgust and protested, “How can I do that?” She replied: “What do you say, my child? Look, I am doing it.” Saying so, she put a little into her mouth. Saying “Please shun aversion,” she placed a portion of it in front of me. As soon as I saw that, the Divine Mother’s terrible form of Chandika arose in my mind; then repeating “Mother, Mother,” I went into ecstasy. I then felt no aversion when the Brahmani put a bit of the flesh into my mouth.

‘Having thus initiated me into *Purnabhisheka* [full initiation into Tantric rites], the Brahmani made me perform innumerable rites. I don’t recall all the details now. But I do remember the day I witnessed the union of a man and a woman: I perceived only the divine sport of Shiva and Shakti, and went into samadhi. When I regained outer

consciousness, the Brahmani told me: “My child, you have attained perfection in an extremely difficult esoteric sadhana and are established in the divine mode. This is the last sadhana of the heroic mode of worship.” Shortly afterwards, with the help of another Bhairavi who came to Dakshin-eswar, I performed the worship of the female figure in accordance with Tantric rites. This ritual was performed in the daytime in view of all, in the open natmandir of the Kali temple. I gave her one and a quarter rupees as an offering. Thus, I completed the sadhana of the heroic mode. Throughout the long period of the Tantric sadhana, I always maintained my attitude towards all women as mother, and I also could not touch even a drop of *karana* [meaning *wine*, but also *cause*]. Whenever I heard the word *karana* or smelled wine, I would realize the Cause of the universe, God, and lose outer consciousness. I would likewise go into samadhi as soon as I heard the word *yoni*, [meaning *female organ*, but also *source*], thinking of the Source of the world, God.¹⁷

Vatsalya Bhava Sadhana

‘Babaji [Jatadhari] served the image of Ramlala for many years. He carried his deity wherever he went. Whatever he got by begging he would cook and offer to him. Not only that, he actually saw Ramlala eating, or demanding something to eat, or wanting to go for a walk, or childishly asking for something, and so on. Jatadhari was absorbed in serving Ramlala and overwhelmed with joy. I also saw Ramlala acting like that. I stayed with Jatadhari for almost the whole day and watched Ramlala.

‘As the days passed, I felt that Ramlala loved me more and more. As long as I remained with Jatadhari, Ramlala was happy and playful. But whenever I left and went to my own room, he followed me there at once. He wouldn’t remain with Jatadhari, even though I ordered him not to

come with me. I thought at first that this must be an illusion. For how could the deity whom Jatadhari had worshipped for so long with such devotion love me more than him? But it was not my imagination. I actually saw Ramlala as I see you—now dancing ahead of me, now following me. Sometimes he insisted on being taken on my lap. But then when I picked him up, he wouldn’t want to stay there. He would run around in the sun, plucking flowers among the thorns, or splashing and swimming in the Ganges. I told him over and over again: “Don’t do that, my child. You’ll get blisters on the soles of your feet if you run in the sun. You’ll catch cold and fever if you stay in the water so long.” But he never listened to my words, however much I warned him. He’d go right on with his pranks. Sometimes he’d look at me sweetly with his beautiful eyes, or he’d pout and make faces at me. Then I’d get really angry and scold him, “Just you wait, you rascal,” I’d tell him, “I’ll give you a big thrashing today. I’ll pound your bones into powder.” I’d pull him out of the water or the sun and try to tempt him with some gift to stay and play inside the room. If he went on being naughty, I’d give him a couple of slaps. But when I did that he’d pout and look at me with tears in his eyes, and I’d feel such pain that I’d take him on my lap and comfort him. All these things actually happened.

‘One day, when I was going to bathe in the Ganges, he insisted on coming with me. What could I do? I had to let him. But then he wouldn’t come out of the water. I begged him to, but he wouldn’t listen. At last I got angry and I dunked him, saying, “All right—stay in as long as you like!” While I was doing this, I actually saw him gasping and struggling for breath! “What am I doing?” I thought to myself in dismay. I pulled him out of the water and took him in my arms.

‘I can’t describe how greatly another incident pained me and how bitterly I wept because of it.

On that day Ramlala kept asking me for something to eat, and all I had to give him was some coarse parched rice that wasn't properly husked. As he was eating it, the husks scratched his delicate, tender tongue. I felt so sorry! I took him on my lap and exclaimed: "Your mother Kausalya used to feed you cream and butter with the greatest care, and I've been so thoughtless, giving you the coarse food!" (574-6).

'On some days Jatadhari would cook food to offer Ramlala, but couldn't find him. Then he would come running in distress to my room, and there would be Ramlala playing on the floor. Jatadhari's feelings were terribly hurt. He'd scold Ramlala, saying: "I took so much trouble to cook food for you. I looked all over the place—and here you were, all the time! You don't care about me. You have forgotten everything. And that's how you always are. You do just as you please. You have no kindness or affection. You left your parents and went into the forest. Your poor father died of a broken heart, and you never even came back to show yourself to him on his deathbed!" Talking like this, Jatadhari would drag Ramlala back to his own room and feed him. Thus, the days rolled on. Jatadhari stayed on at Dakshineswar for a long time, because Ramlala didn't want to go away and leave me. And Jatadhari couldn't bear to leave Ramlala behind, having loved him for so long.

"Then one day Jatadhari came to me, crying with joy, and said: "Ramlala has revealed himself to me in a way that I have never known before but have always longed for. Now the desire of my life is fulfilled. Ramlala says he won't go away from here; he doesn't want to leave you. But I'm not sad about it anymore. He lives happily with you and plays joyfully, and I am full of bliss when I see him this way. I have learned now to be happy simply in his happiness, so I can now leave him with you and go away. I will enjoy knowing

that he is happy with you." Then Jatadhari gave me the image of Ramlala and said good-bye. And Ramlala has been here ever since' (579-80).



Woollen socks worn by Sri Ramakrishna

Madhura Bhava Sadhana

'Unless one is free of lust, one cannot understand Radha, the embodiment of mahabhava. When the gopis saw Satchidananda Krishna, they would lose body-consciousness as they experienced bliss a million times more intense than sexual union. Could the thought of trivial sensual pleasure arise then in their minds? The divine lustre of Krishna's body would touch them, making them experience more ecstasy in every pore of their bodies than sexual pleasure could ever give them!' (289).

'It is impossible to describe the incomparable, pure, heavenly beauty and sweetness of Radha, who renounced everything out of her passionate love for Krishna. Her complexion was light yellow like stamens of the *nagakeshara* [*mesua ferra*] flower' (300).

'Oh, what a state I passed through! I passed some days absorbed in Shiva and Durga, some days absorbed in Radha and Krishna, and some days absorbed in Sita and Rama. Assuming Radha's attitude, I would cry for Krishna, and assuming Sita's attitude, I would cry for Rama.'¹⁸

'Sometimes, when the mind descended to the Lila, I would meditate day and night on Sita and

Rama. At those times I would constantly behold the forms of Sita and Rama. ...

'Again, I used to be absorbed in the ideal of Radha and Krishna and would constantly see their forms. Or again, I would be absorbed in the ideal of Gauranga. He is the harmonization of two ideals: the Purusha and the Prakriti. At such times I would always see the form of Gauranga.

'Then a change came over me. The mind left the plane of the Lila and ascended to the Nitya. ... I no longer enjoyed seeing the forms of God; I said to myself, "They come and go". I lifted my mind above them. I removed all the pictures of gods and goddesses from my room and began to meditate on the Primal Purusha, the indivisible Satchidananda, regarding myself as His handmaid' (743-4).

'For many days I cherished the feeling that I was a companion of the Divine Mother. I used

to say: "I am the handmaid of Brahmamayi, the Blissful Mother. O companions of the Divine Mother, make me the Mother's handmaid! I shall go about proudly, saying, 'I am Brahmamayi's handmaid!'"' (483).

'I spent many days as the handmaid of God. I dressed myself in women's clothes, put on ornaments, and covered the upper part of my body with a scarf, just like a woman. With the scarf on I used to perform the evening worship before the image' (603).

'I put on a nose-ring. One can conquer lust by assuming the attitude of a woman.

'One must worship the Adyasakti. She must be propitiated. She alone has assumed all female forms. Therefore I look on all women as mother' (701).

(To be concluded)

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Leather slippers used by Sri Ramakrishna



Sri Ramakrishna in Contemporary Eyes

Swami Vimalatmananda

IN HIS FOREWORD TO the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Aldous Huxley regrets the dearth of reliable accounts of the lives of spiritual geniuses.¹ It is therefore of singular importance that many of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples left authentic records of his life and teachings. There were also numerous devotees, scholars, and admirers who after meeting Sri Ramakrishna recorded their wonderful observations in journals, periodicals, and books. Some among them were famous personalities and scholars of high repute, while others were ordinary persons. They had spoken with Sri Ramakrishna, bowed at his feet, stayed with him, witnessed his divine play, listened to his conversations, and observed him closely. Thus, their writings have an historical value. They have analysed Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings in their own way and understanding. Swami Vivekananda rightly said: 'Each devotee colours Shri Ramakrishna in the light of his own understanding and each forms his own idea of him from his peculiar standpoint. He was, as it were, a great Sun and each one of us is eyeing him, as it were, through a different kind of coloured glass.'² Here we shall briefly review a few of these personalities and their views on Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings.

'Bees' Swarm to Dakshineswar

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'As soon as flowers blossom, bees come of themselves. They have not to be invited. When love for and devotion

to God become truly manifested in you, all who have sacrificed their lives, or have resolved to do so in quest of God, that is to say, for the attainment of Truth, cannot but come to you under the influence of an inexplicable spiritual law.'³ Indeed, there was a continuous flow of sadhakas, saints, pandits, devotees, and other people from various parts of the country to the Dakshineswar Kali temple after Sri Ramakrishna perfected himself in different sadhanas. He enjoyed their company, and some of them took spiritual initiation from him. Upon his wish, Mathur Babu, his 'sponsor' for fourteen years, arranged for various requisites of worship, a large store of goods, and comfortable accommodation for these visitors.

Vaishnavacharan Goswami, a great leader of the Vaishnava community, a sadhaka versed in the scriptures and scholar of Nyaya and Vedanta, accepted the invitation by Mathur Babu and Bhairavi Brahmani to ascertain the spiritual condition of Sri Ramakrishna. He came to the Kali temple and was astounded to see Sri Ramakrishna. Vaishnavacharan was the first scholar to proclaim Sri Ramakrishna's uniqueness. 'With the help of the subtle insight born of Sadhana, Vaishnavacharan came to know the moment he saw him that the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] was a great soul' (582). Further, Vaishnavacharan firmly asserted that Sri Ramakrishna had undoubtedly experienced *mahabhava*⁴ and that was a sure sign of the rare manifestation of God in human form.

Gauri Pandit of Indesh, a village in the Bankura district of West Bengal, was a great scholar and an eminent tantric sadhaka who paid Sri Ramakrishna a visit in 1870 at Dakshineswar.

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Gauri had developed through sadhana an occult power that rendered him invincible in debate. This time also, Mathur Babu convened a meeting. Gauri Pandit saw Sri Ramakrishna's lifestyle and personality. With a keen spiritual insight born of tapas he came to know that Sri Ramakrishna was not an ordinary sadhaka, but a great soul. Not entering into any scholarly discussion Gauri Pandit unhesitatingly said, 'Does Vaishnavacharan call you an incarnation only? I should consider his estimate very low. My conviction is that you are He, from a part of whom the Incarnations come down to the world from age to age to do good to humanity, and with whose power they accomplish that work of theirs!' (594).

Pandit Padmalochan, a scholar of Nyaya and Vedanta, was the court pandit of the Maharaja of Burdwan. Once, while convalescing from an illness at Ariadaha, not far from Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna went to see him along with his nephew Hriday. Sri Ramakrishna found Pandit Padmalochan a liberal-minded sadhaka, well versed in the scriptures. Padmalochan also had the firm conviction that Sri Ramakrishna was a great soul who had attained an extraordinary state of spiritual evolution that went beyond the states described in the scriptures. He said to Sri Ramakrishna: 'When I shall come round, I'll convene a meeting of all the scholars and tell them all that you are an incarnation of God. I'll see who can refute my word' (634).

Another scholar who visited Sri Ramakrishna was Narayan Shastri from Rajputana. He had led an orthodox life of a brahmachari, celibate student, for twenty-five years and studied the five branches of Indian philosophy under competent teachers at Varanasi and some other places. He came to Navadwip to study the Nyaya philosophy. After acquiring mastery over Nyaya he came to Dakshineswar and stayed with Sri Ramakrishna for several months. He was charmed on

seeing Sri Ramakrishna and decided to realize Brahman under his guidance. He witnessed Sri Ramakrishna's wonderful spiritual experiences and visions of the seven spiritual planes as mentioned in Vedanta. He had read and learnt words like samadhi and Satchidananda while Sri Ramakrishna was actually experiencing these states day and night. Narayan Shastri said to himself: 'Ah, how wonderful! Where else shall I have such a person to teach and explain the hidden meanings of the Sastras? This opportunity must not be missed. The means of immediate knowledge of Brahman must be learnt from him at any cost' (627). One day he got the opportunity and prayed to Sri Ramakrishna for sannyasa. Sri Ramakrishna agreed to grant sannyasa to his able disciple. Narayan Shastri was the first sannyasin disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. After sannyasa he left Dakshineswar and went to Vasisht Ashrama for the realization of Brahman.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), the founder of the Arya Samaj and an independent interpreter of the Vedas, stayed at Baranagar (Sinthi), Calcutta, from 15 December 1872 to 15 April 1873.⁵ Though widely known for his scholarship, he had not started his own movement yet. On hearing of Swami Dayananda, Sri Ramakrishna visited him and later referred to this incident thus: 'I found that he had acquired a little power; his chest was always red. He was in the state of Vaikhari, speaking on scriptural subjects night and day.'⁶ That day Keshabchandra Sen also came to see Dayananda. Seeing Keshab, Sri Ramakrishna went into samadhi. Swami Dayananda became spellbound at this sight and expressed his high opinion about Sri Ramakrishna to Captain Vishwanath Upadhyay: 'We merely study the Vedas and Vedanta; but I see the fruits of the scriptures in this great soul. After seeing him it is evident that scholars only drink butter-milk by churning the scriptures and great souls

like him partake of the entire butter.⁷

One ought not to imagine that only eminent sadhakas and pandits recognized Sri Ramakrishna's greatness. Chinu Shankhari of Kamarpukur was among the first persons to realize Sri Ramakrishna's divinity. Prasannamayi of the Laha family of Kamarpukur also respected Sri Ramakrishna as a man of God. Aunt Bhanu of Jayrambati knew who Sri Ramakrishna really was. Sri Ramakrishna himself was surprised to find some really advanced souls at Kamarpukur who could appreciate his spiritual eminence.

Views of Brahmo Leaders

During Sri Ramakrishna's time the Brahmo movement had great influence on people, especially on the youth. After Raja Rammohan Roy (1774–1833), who founded this movement in 1828, the leadership rested successively on Devendranath Tagore, Keshabchandra Sen, Shivanath Shastri, Pratapchandra Majumdar, and others. Sri Ramakrishna knew them all. He went to see Devendranath (1817–1905) at his Jorasanko residence in Kolkata with Mathur Babu. He also paid a visit to Keshabchandra Sen (1838–84) who was then staying with his followers in a garden-house at Belgharia, a short distance from Dakshineswar, on 15 March 1875. Although Keshab could not fully understand Sri Ramakrishna, the latter could grasp Keshab's spiritual potential.

It was Keshab who first thought of making Sri Ramakrishna widely known through the Brahmo Samaj's organ the *Indian Mirror*. It was also Keshab who first collected Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and published them in *Dharma Tattwa*, a Bengali journal, on 31 July 1875. The first public report on Sri Ramakrishna was published in the *Indian Mirror* on 28 March 1875:

A HINDU SAINT—We met one (a sincere Hindu devotee) not long ago and were charmed by the

depth, penetration and simplicity of his spirit. The never-ceasing metaphors and analogies in which he indulged, are most of them as apt as they are beautiful. The characteristics of his mind are the very opposite to those of Pandit Dayananda Saraswati, the former being so gentle, tender and contemplative, as the latter is sturdy, masculine and polemical. Hinduism must have in it a deep sense of beauty, truth and goodness to inspire such men as these.⁸

In the 14 May 1875 issue of *Dharma Tattwa* a life sketch of Sri Ramakrishna was published by Keshab. Keshab continued to publish news about Sri Ramakrishna till his (Keshab's) death in 1884, and after that his disciples followed in the footsteps of their leader.⁹

The *Dharma Tattwa* published news of Sri Ramakrishna's passing in the issue of 31 August 1886. It reflected the close relationship that the

Devendranath Tagore



Brahmo devotees had with him: 'On Thursday evening before *Bhadrotsab* (7th Bhadra) Bhai Trailokyanath Sanyal gave a discourse on the life of the late Paramhansa. That day at 7 o'clock in the morning, a special prayer service was held at Devalaya for Paramhansa. All the preachers spent that day by going bare-footed and eating vegetarian food (*havishtyanna*).'¹⁰

Pratapchandra Majumdar (1840–1905) had travelled and preached the Brahmo ideas of religion in different parts of India, Europe, Japan, and the US. Pratap went to Dakshineswar with Keshab on many occasions and enjoyed Sri Ramakrishna's holy company. Sri Ramakrishna also loved him much. Pratap wrote a fine article on Sri Ramakrishna for the *Sunday Mirror* of 16 April 1876, which was reproduced in the *Theistic Quarterly Review* of October–December 1879. It also included the sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, the first time these were being published in English. In this article Pratap wrote:

His religion is his only recommendation. And what is his religion? It is Hinduism, but, Hinduism of a strange type. Ramkrishna Paramhansa (for that is the saint's name) is the worshipper of no particular Hindu God. He is not a Shaivait, he is not a Shakta, he is not a Vaishnava, he is not a Vedantist. Yet he is *all these*. He worships Shiva, he worships Kali, he worships Rama, he worships Krishna, and is a confirmed advocate of Vedantist doctrines. He is an idolater and is yet a faithful and most devoted medi[t]ator of the perfections of the one, formless, infinite Deity whom he terms '*Akhanda Sachchidananda*'.¹¹

Acharya Shivanath Shastri (1847–1919), another Brahmo leader whom Sri Ramakrishna loved much, recorded his reminiscences in the book *Men I Have Seen*. He observed: 'I was convinced that he was no longer a *sadhak* or a devotee under exercise, but was a *siddha purusha* or one

who had attained direct vision of spiritual truth. ... My acquaintance with him, though short, was fruitful by strengthening many a spiritual thought in me. ... He was certainly one of the most memorable personalities I have come across in life.'¹²

Acharya Vijaykrishna Goswami came from the Vaishnava tradition and was a descendant of Advaita Goswami, one of the chief companions of Sri Chaitanya. But he embraced Brahmo Dharma and had become an *acharya*, teacher, of the Brahmo Samaj. Due to differences in opinion with Keshab, he founded the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and subsequently returned to the Vaishnava fold. He visited Sri Ramakrishna many times at Dakshineswar and accepted him as an incarnation. Once Vijaykrishna said, 'I have travelled to various parts of this country and across mountains, and have met many sadhus and great souls, but, I have never seen any one like him (*pointing to the Master*). Here I see one hundred percent spirituality. Elsewhere I have seen twelve percent, sometimes six, sometimes two and sometimes one percent, but I have never found even twenty-five percent in any other soul.'¹³

In the Eyes of Christians and Muslims

Two Christian missionaries, Rev. Joseph Cook and Miss Mary Pigot, met Sri Ramakrishna with Keshabchandra Sen aboard a steamer cruising on the Ganga on 23 February 1882. The two were charmed to see Sri Ramakrishna in ecstasy, something they had never seen before. This incident was published in the *New Dispensation* and *Dharma Tattwa* on 26 February 1882:

On Thursday last there was an interesting excursion by a steam launch up the river to Dakshineswar. The Rev. Joseph Cook, Miss Pigot, and the apostles of the New Dispensation together with a number of our young men embarked at about 11 o'clock. The revered Paramhansa of Dakshineswar, as soon as he heard of the arrival

of the party, came to the riverside, and was taken on board. He successively went through all the phases of spiritual excitement which characterizes him. Passing through a long interval of unconsciousness he prayed, sang, and discoursed on spiritual subjects. Mr. Cook watched him very closely, and seemed much interested by what he saw. Mr. Cook represented the extreme culture of Christian theology and thought. The Paramhansa represented the extreme culture of Indian Yoga and Bhakti in short the traditional piety of the East. And the apostles of the Brahmo Somaj in bringing together the two proved that they combined both in the all-inclusive harmony of the New Dispensation.¹⁴

Dr Abdul Wajij of East Bengal—now Bangladesh—while studying medicine in Calcutta met Sri Ramakrishna in 1885 through his friend Ramchandra Dutta and became a devotee. In 1898 Dr Wajij visited Ramchandra Dutta at Kankurgachhi and was received cordially by the devotees. He removed his shoes and socks, went to the shrine, and bowed down three times to Sri Ramakrishna. The memory of Sri Ramakrishna brought tears to his eyes. At the devotees' request Dr Wajij narrated his reminiscences: 'Our holy Koran mentions some signs of a prophet. We noticed those signs in Sri Ramakrishna. After seeing and listening to him we believed that he was a prophet. I still had some attachment to lust and gold, so I did not dare visit him again at Dakshineswar.'¹⁵

Impressions of Poets, Educationists, and Writers

We shall now present the impressions of three celebrated personalities on Sri Ramakrishna. The first is Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), whom Sri Ramakrishna visited on 5 August 1882 at his Badurbagan residence in Calcutta. Vidyasagar was a great scholar, educator, writer, and philanthropist. He gave shape to modern Bengali, wrote a book

on Sanskrit grammar that still remains a standard text, and founded the Metropolitan Institute. Knowing that M, the recorder of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* was a teacher in Vidyasagar's school, Sri Ramakrishna requested him to arrange a meeting with Vidyasagar. With the latter's consent, Sri Ramakrishna visited him at home in the company of M, Bhavanath Chattopadhyay, and Pratapchandra Hazra. Vidyasagar was then sixty-two, while Sri Ramakrishna was forty-six. As soon as Sri Ramakrishna met Vidyasagar, he smiled in an ecstatic mood and asked for a glass of drinking water. Vidyasagar himself brought some sweets for Sri Ramakrishna to take with the water. The conversation that followed was interspersed with humour. When Sri Ramakrishna explained the nature of a pandit, Vidyasagar listened to him in silence. The others too were attentive to every word he said. When he remarked that Brahman is the sole entity undefiled by speech Vidyasagar exclaimed: 'Oh! That is a remarkable statement. I have learnt something new today.'

Sri Ramakrishna went on discussing one topic after another. Vidyasagar remained a keen listener. Sri Ramakrishna also sang two songs in his melodious voice. M observed, 'While singing, the Master went into samadhi. He was seated on the bench, facing west, the palms of his hands joined together, his body erect and motionless. Everyone watched him expectantly. Vidyasagar, too, was speechless and could not take his eyes from the Master.'¹⁶ Sri Ramakrishna invited Vidyasagar to visit Dakshineswar. Vidyasagar agreed, but the visit never materialized.

Next year, on 2 May, the young Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) met Sri Ramakrishna at a Brahmo Samaj festival in Kashishwar Mitra's house at Nandan Bagan, Calcutta (219). Later, Tagore composed beautiful poems on Sri Ramakrishna in Bengali and English to commemorate the latter's birth centenary in 1936. In these

poems he expressed his views on the life, spirituality, and universal teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, and also on his contribution to religious history.

A parliament of religions was held in Calcutta between 1 and 8 March 1937, in connection with the centenary celebration of Sri Ramakrishna. Eminent speakers from across the globe participated in the fifteen sessions of the parliament. Tagore presided over the evening session of 3 March at University Institute Hall, College Square. He paid tribute to Sri Ramakrishna in these words:

I venerate Paramahansa Deva, because he, in an arid age of religious nihilism, proved the truth of our spiritual heritage by realizing it, because the largeness of his spirit could comprehend seemingly antagonistic modes of *sadhana*, and because the simplicity of his soul shames for all time the pomp and pedantry of pontiffs and pundits. ...

Great souls, like Ramakrishna Paramahansa, have a comprehensive vision of Truth, they have the power to grasp the significance of each different form of the Reality that is one in all—but the masses of believers are unable to reconcile the conflict of codes and commands. Their timid and shrunken imagination, instead of being liberated by the vision of the Infinite in religion, is held captive in bigotry and is tortured and exploited by priests and fanatics for uses hardly anticipated by those who originally received it.¹⁷

Another great contemporary literary figure was the deputy magistrate and author Bankim-chandra Chatterjee (1838–94). He wrote many novels on social, religious, and historical themes. He was a friend of Adhar Sen (1855–85), a staunch devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, whose house the latter blessed with his presence on several occasions. It was at Adhar's house that Sri Ramakrishna met Bankim on 6 December 1884. Adhar introduced Bankim to Sri Ramakrishna as a great scholar and author of many books. 'He has come to see

you,' he added. The conversation began with the meaning of the name 'Bankim'. Sri Ramakrishna was in a humorous mood and there was plenty of laughter. Trailokyanath Sanyal of the Brahmo Samaj sang for the devotees.

Presently Sri Ramakrishna stood up and lost consciousness of the outer world. He became completely indrawn, absorbed in samadhi. The devotees stood around him in a circle. Pushing aside the crowd, Bankim came near the Master and began to watch him attentively. He had never seen anyone in samadhi. After a few minutes Sri Ramakrishna regained partial consciousness and began to dance in an ecstatic mood. It was a never-to-be-forgotten scene. Bankim and his Anglicized friends looked at him in amazement.¹⁸

When Bankim was about to leave, he bowed down to Sri Ramakrishna and said, 'I have a prayer to make. Please be kind enough to grace my house with the dust of your holy feet' (675). Sri Ramakrishna agreed to this proposal, but also pointed out that it depended on the will of God. Bankim's desire was never fulfilled. To respect Bankim's invitation, Sri Ramakrishna sent Girish and M to his Calcutta residence. Bankim had a long discussion with them about Sri Ramakrishna, as he was charmed by this God-man of Dakshineswar (676).

What His Doctors Said

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* records the names of around twenty-one medical practitioners—Ayurvedic (Kaviraj), homeopathic, and allopathic—who came to treat Sri Ramakrishna for his various ailments at different times. Among them were Gangaprasad Sen (1824–95), Bhagawan Rudra, Rajendralal Dutta (1818–89), and Mahendralal Sarkar (1833–1904). All of them expressed their high regards for Sri Ramakrishna.

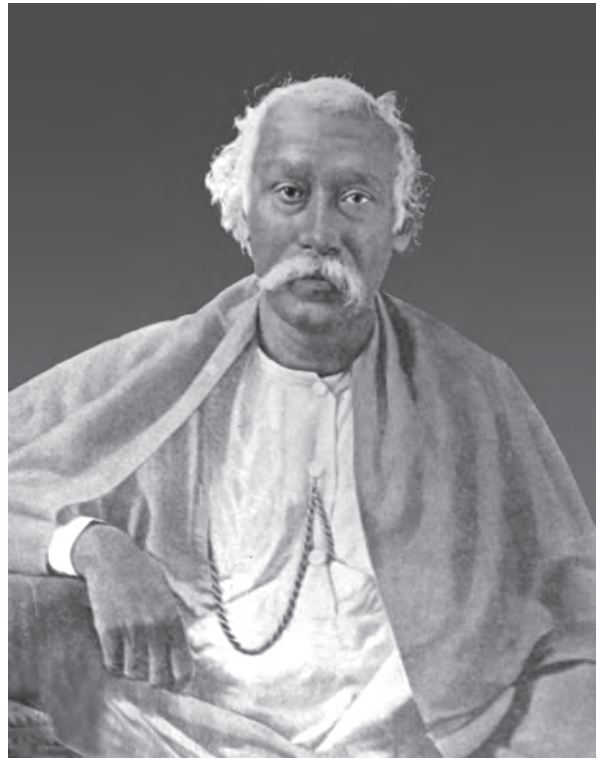
Sri Ramakrishna had been placed under the treatment of Dr Sarkar from October 1885 up to his *mahasamadhi*. Though Dr Sarkar was a very busy physician, he spent six or seven hours a day in conversation with Sri Ramakrishna. He also argued with him, and Sri Ramakrishna gave him rational answers that he had to accept. He looked upon the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna as his own kith and kin. The association with Sri Ramakrishna gradually transformed Dr Sarkar. About Sri Ramakrishna's teachings he once remarked: 'Why do his [meaning the Master's] words go straight to our hearts? He has experienced the truths of different religions. He himself has practised the disciplines of the Hindu, Christian, Mussalman, Sakta, and Vaishnava religions. The bees can make good honey only if they gather nectar from different flowers' (876-7). One day one of the doctor's friends said to him, 'Sir, I hear that some speak of the Paramahansa as an Incarnation of God. You see him every day. How do you feel about it?' Dr Sarkar answered, 'I have greatest regard for him as a man' (879).

What the Journalists Wrote

Journalist Nagendranath Gupta (1861/62-1940) was a follower of the Brahmo Samaj and a writer of repute. He held editorial posts with the *Phoenix*, the *Tribune*, the *Leader*, *Pradip*, and *Prabhat*. He was a lifelong member of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and also wrote many books.

Nagendranath saw Sri Ramakrishna during his steamer cruise in 1882. He wrote in his book *Reflections and Reminiscences*:

The Paramhansa was wearing a red-bordered *dhoti* and a shirt, unbuttoned. ... The Paramhansa was dark-complexioned with a beard, and his eyes, never wide open were introspective. He was of medium height, slender almost to leanness and very frail-looking. As a matter of fact, he had an exceptionally nervous tempera-



Dr Mahendralal Sarkar

ment, and was extremely sensitive to the slightest physical pain. He spoke with a very slight but charming stammer in very plain Bengali, mixing the two 'yous' frequently. Practically all the talking was done by the Paramhansa, and the rest, including Keshab himself, were respectful and eager listeners. ... I have never heard any other man speak as he did. It was an unbroken flow of profound spiritual truths and experiences, welling up from the perennial spring of his own devotion and wisdom. The similes and metaphors, the apt illustrations, were as striking as they were original.¹⁹

Nagendranath left a graphic account of Sri Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi* in the same book:

As I was going out of the house in the afternoon, a printed slip was handed to me announcing that Paramhansa Ramakrishna had passed into final *Maha-samadhi*. I drove straight to the garden house at Cossipore where the august patient had passed his last days, surrounded and tended

with unremitting love and devotion by his disciples, admirers and worshippers. There he lay on a handsome bed covered with a fresh white sheet and flowers, in front of the portico of the house, under the open sky. He lay on his right side, a pillow under his head and another between his legs. The lips which had never ceased teaching even during the months he had been suffering from the intolerable agony of cancer of the throat were stilled in the silence of death. The final serenity, the calm, the peace and the supreme majesty of death were on the face, now smooth and relaxed in its last repose. The smile on the lips showed that the spirit had passed in the rapture of *samadhi*. Narendranath (Vivekananda), Mahendranath and other disciples, Trailokya Nath of the New Dispensation Church of the Brahmo Samaj and others were seated on the ground. As I sat down beside them and looked at the ineffable peace of the face before us, the words of Ramakrishna came back to me, that the body is merely a sheath and the indwelling real Self is difficult of realization. And as we sat in the waning afternoon, waiting for the heat of the day to pass before carrying the remains to the cremation ground, a single cloud passed overhead and a small shower of very large drops of rain fell. Those present said this was the *pushpa-vrishti*, the rain of flowers from heaven, of which the ancient books write, the welcome of the immortal gods to a mortal man passing from mortality to immortality, one of the great ones of the earth and heaven (76-7).

Krishnaprasanna Sen (1849-1902) was an orator, patriot, singer, poet, and preacher, the founder of Aryadharma Pracharini Sabha and the editor of *Dharmapracharak*. He took sannyasa in 1859 from Sri Dayaldas Baba and came to be known as Swami Krishnananda. Krishnananda met Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. He collected material from Ramchandra Dutta and wrote a thoughtful article, *Mahatma Ramakrishna* in the *Dharmapracharak* of 6 August 1884:

One whose father (Shiva in the cremation ground) is mad, mother (Kali) is mad, cannot help being mad. Whoever goes to a fair of mad people, a mart of mad persons, commerce of madness, turns mad. Mahatma Ramakrishna is a mad man of this market. ...

He does not wear an ochre loincloth, his head is not tonsured; so why have people taken him to be a Paramahansa? He is not a Paramahansa by virtue of his insignia, but a Paramahansa by his actions. Wonderful is his mood and wonderful his nature. ... His words are so simple, so sweet, and so touching that hearing them leads to an outpouring of devotion even in a stony heart. ... Truly, he is a man without foes. By sitting near him for a while one receives through conversation such lofty and penetrating wisdom as is hard to acquire even after studying the scriptures for a long time. His life is a living book, worthy of study by all seekers of welfare' (24-5).

Bhavanicharan Banerjee alias Upadhyay Brahmandhava (1861-1907) was a remarkable personality. A staunch follower of Keshabchandra Sen, he embraced Roman Catholicism in later life before finally reverting back to Hinduism. He was a journalist, patriot, orator, and Vedantist who travelled across Europe to deliver lectures on Vedanta. He met Sri Ramakrishna with his friends at Dakshineswar and wrote articles on him in the Bengali daily *Sandhya* and the monthly *Swaraj*, both of which he edited. Brahmandhava expressed his ideas beautifully in *Swaraj*:

Who is this Ramakrishna? He is the prince of Sadhakas, who through his spiritual practice, so rich with emotion and fervour, gathered round him all the peculiar spiritual attitudes of the different sects and faiths of the world, and thus demonstrated the all-comprehensiveness of his Brahman-realization. In his personality have been synthesized and unified the superconsciousness of the Yogis, the sweetness of the

love of the Gopis of Brindavan, and the awe-inspiring attitude of the Sakti worshipper. He practised Islam and realized its highest goal. He also realized the Christhood of Jesus. Fully established in his consciousness of the immutable Brahman and keeping intact the continuity of the Eternal Dharma of Aryas, Sri Ramakrishna welcomed with open arms all the diversities of the spiritual life and enriched India by incorporating in it all the new spiritual forces and orientating them all to Advaita.²⁰

In the February 1886 number of *Vedavyas*, the organ of the Hindu revivalists, the editor wrote: 'We used to visit him frequently to hear his nectar-like instructions. ... We used to see his place frequented by men of all religions. Besides Christian, Mussalman, Buddhist, Brahmo, Jaina, Hindu, countless men of other religions used to come to him and respectfully bowed at his feet.'²¹

Adoration of Devotees and Disciples

It was but natural that the devotees and disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, both lay and monastic, preached his glory during his lifetime. They are the eternal companions of Sri Ramakrishna. M recorded the conversations and acts of Sri Ramakrishna in his unparalleled work *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. Swami Saradananda wrote an authentic biography, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, an analytical account of the life, philosophy, and religion of Sri Ramakrishna. Romain Rolland notes that 'Saradananda is an authority both as a philosopher and as an historian. His books are rich in metaphysical sketches, which place the spiritual appearance of Ramakrishna exactly in its place in the rich procession of Hindu thought.'²² Ramchandra Dutta, Akshaykumar Sen, Priyanath Sinha (alias Gurudas Barman), Vaikunthanath Sanyal, Dr Shashibhushan Ghosh, and Sureshchandra Dutta—each of these lay disciples recorded their observations on the

life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, which have great historical relevance. Mahendranath Dutta (1869–1956), Swami Vivekananda's brother, and Ramlal Chattopadhyay (1858–1933), Sri Ramakrishna's nephew, also chronicled the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.

Ramchandra Dutta compiled the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna in his book *Tattwasara* in 1885. Later he elaborated upon *Tattwasara* and published it as *Tattwa-prakashika* in 1886–7. He also published a Bengali magazine *Tattwamanjari* to spread Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. After Sri Ramakrishna's *mahasamadhi*, Ramchandra wrote his first Bengali biography *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadever Jivanavrittanta*, which was published on 8 July 1890. He also delivered eighteen lectures on Sri Ramakrishna in Calcutta between 1893 and 1897.

Mahendranath Dutta saw Sri Ramakrishna on many occasions. He was a gifted thinker and wrote around eighty-six books on different subjects. In *Sri Ramakrishner Anudhyan* (Recollections of Sri Ramakrishna) he wrote:

When I went to eat on the roof [of the house where Paramahansa Mahashaya was visiting] I found that brahmanas, kayasthas, and all were sitting together and partaking of the food. ... It was not the custom in those days for people of different castes to eat together. It was also the practice then to invite people at their homes; but here I found people eating uninvited. And it was not a feast of merry friends. ... Here everyone was partaking of the food with reverence and devotion; none was disrespectful. There was a feeling of attraction between the people taking food; a feeling that everybody there was one's own. ...

A glow or power would emanate from the person of Paramahansa Mahashaya. It would fill the whole room and then the courtyard; it would even pass through the window grills and spill on to the road in waves. ... [Under its

influence] one would lose one's usual thoughts, even the thought of one's home. The mind would leave the body and go to a different realm. ...The world and its activities would be left far away, [and would appear] like an image. All desire for and attachment to the world would be lost; even the consciousness of one's hand, feet, body would vanish. One would get into a disembodied state, as it were. ...

Paramahansa Mahashaya silently brought about a [new] consciousness in society through his love, without anyone noticing it. The social customs and practices that others could not change through rational arguments and lectures, Paramahansa Mahashaya gradually modified through his influence; and yet, even the orthodox could not say anything against this change.²³

Ramlal Chattopadhyay—popularly known as Ramlaldada—was Sri Ramakrishna's nephew and his attendant. He gave a vivid picture of Sri Ramakrishna's morning routine at Dakshineswar:

The Master usually got up at three or three thirty in the morning, and as soon as he got out of bed, I would wake up. When he went to the pine grove I would either lead the way or follow him with a jug and towel. He would then go to the pond, throw off his cloth, and sit on the ghat, dangling his legs. I would bring him water and he would wash his face, hands, and feet. After covering himself with his towel, he would return to his room. ... After that he would take a little Ganga water on his palm and sprinkle it on his head, saying, 'Brahma-vari, Brahma-vari! Ganga, Ganga! Hari Om Tat Sat! [The water of the Ganga is as pure as Brahman. God is the only Reality]'. Then he would take some prasad of Jagannath and Kali and also a few bits of dried bel leaves that had been offered at the shrine of Tarakeswar Shiva, which he kept in a small bag. With joined palms he would salute all the holy pictures in his room and then sit down on the small cot...

At about nine or ten in the morning, after he had finished talking with the devotees, I would rub oil on his body. But I would put oil on his head only with his permission. ...


After oil had been rubbed on him, he would go to the chandni ghat on the Ganga for a bath and then go to the Kali temple. There he would decorate the Mother with flowers or offer flowers and bel leaves at her feet. Sometimes he would put flowers on his own head and then merge into samadhi.²⁴

Swami Adbhutananda—Sri Ramakrishna's 'Leto'—an unschooled shepherd boy whom Swami Vivekananda once described as 'Sri Ramakrishna's greatest miracle', was his faithful attendant. The observations of Swami Adbhutananda on the significance of the Master's life are remarkable. He said to the devotees:

Sri Ramakrishna embodies an ideal for everyone. He was an ideal householder, an ideal monk, an ideal guru, and an ideal disciple. Moreover, his life can serve as an example for all faiths and all sects. He is an ideal for the worshippers of Shakti, as he practised and attained perfection in all the important Tantric sadhanas. He is an ideal for the Vaishnavites, for his devotion to Hari is unparalleled. He is also an ideal for the Shaivites, as he attained the vision of Lord Shiva too. He is an ideal for the devotees of Ramachandra, for he saw Rama and Sita. He is an ideal for the Vedantins as well, having experienced nirvikalpa samadhi, the culmination of the Vedantic sadhana, within three days. He is also an ideal for the Christians and Mohammedans, because he had the vision of Christ and also of the Prophet.²⁵

Rani Rasmani (1793–1861), the proprietor of the Dakshineswar Kali temple, and her son-in-law Mathur Babu (d.1871), recognized the divinity of Sri Ramakrishna early during his stay at Dakshineswar. To them, the Divine Mother's play was wonderful, and so was her worshipper. Both

of them regarded Sri Ramakrishna as their guru.

Since then a multitude of scholars, monks, and Brahmo devotees met Sri Ramakrishna. Long before his close companions arrived, Sri Ramakrishna would summon them in the evenings from the roof of the building where he stayed, saying, 'Come my children! Oh, Where are you? I cannot bear to live without you.'²⁶ These disciples came to Dakshineswar between 1879 and 1885. Whenever he heard about any person of renown, Sri Ramakrishna would visit him. He also visited the houses of the devotees and sang and danced with them. These devotees were an assorted lot: men and women, educated and uneducated, rich and poor; of diverse castes, faiths, and social status; theists and atheists, Christians and Muslims, intelligent and sober, as well as drunk and mad. They were all blessed. Some of them became his intimate disciples, and some who had been living a brutish life were turned into gods. They all served him wholeheartedly as they saw their own God in him. All of them remembered their holy association with Sri Ramakrishna. Their reminiscences, marked by deep insight and authenticity, have a special value. It is because of their writings that we know better who Sri Ramakrishna was. 

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3. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda, 2 vols (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2004), 2.570.
4. According to the Vaishnava scriptures, *mahabhava*, 'great [spiritual] mood', subsumes nineteen kinds of spiritual moods, which were manifested in the lives of Sri Radha and Sri Chaitanya. See *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 582.
5. Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, trans. E F Malcolm-Smith (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 98.
6. *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 636.
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9. See *Samasamayik Drishtite Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, 1–63.
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17. Rabindranath Tagore, *Sri Ramakrishna Swami Vivekananda—Prasangik Tathya Saha* (Howrah: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Ashrama, 1412 BE), 26, 39.
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24. *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*, 44–5.
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26. *Gospel*, 46.

Sri Ramakrishna: A Wonderful Man

Swami Nirantarananda

IT IS UNDENIABLE THAT our world is full of contradictions. The Vedantins rightly say ‘*dvandvatmakam-idam jagat*; this world is a conglomerate of pairs of opposites.’ Even from a secular viewpoint, life is a paradox. You do not get what you want; what you get, you do not enjoy; what you enjoy is not permanent; and whatever is permanent is boring. But there have been a few people who perceived the unity behind this paradox of the world. Sri Ramakrishna was one of them.

Sri Ramakrishna was indeed a multi-faceted personality. In him was blended jiva and Ishvara, disciple and guru, woman and man. These opposites existed in such perfection in his being that onlookers were often left dumbfounded and would ask in astonishment: ‘Sir! What are you?’ Girishchandra Ghosh, his staunch disciple, reputed playwright, and actor, once asked the Master: ‘Sir, are you a man or a woman?’ The Master replied with a smile: ‘I don’t know.’ Swami Saradananda, his biographer, arrived at two probable interpretations of the Master’s reply. First, that he was the sexless Atman and second, that he perceived the co-existence of both male and female natures within himself.¹

One is faced with a similar perplexity in deciding if Sri Ramakrishna was a guru or a disciple. His disciples certainly regarded him not only as a guru but as an avatara. However, they had to face some criticism over these views from others who

would argue: ‘We have seen Sri Ramakrishna—how humble he was with everyone, how meek, how patient like the earth, how devoid of egotism, lower than the lowliest!’ Again, they would quote the Master saying to the devotees: ‘God is the only guru, father, and master. I am the lowliest of the lowly, a servant of servants. I am equal to a tiny hair of your body—not even a big hair’, and refer to his protests when anyone addressed him as ‘guru’, ‘baba’ [father], or ‘karta’ [master].

Similarly, many were not able to accept Sri Ramakrishna as incarnate Ishvara. They would regard him only as a holy man. It is interesting to see their minds:

These people [the followers] have formed a group with the purpose of making Sri Ramakrishna a god. They are trying to add one more to the existing 333 million deities. ... Are they not satisfied with such a large number of deities? They can choose whomever, as many as they like, from among them. Why increase their number by one more? It is strange that these fellows do not realize that people will lose respect for this holy man if their false claims are exposed (442).

Coexistence of such diverse forms is possible in a person established in a state from which all things and beings of the universe emerge. It is said in *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, the biographical work by Swami Saradananda, that there is a spiritual state between the Absolute and the relative, the junction of the realms of Advaita and Dvaita. And Sri Ramakrishna was commanded

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by the Divine Mother to remain in this state, which she termed *bhavamukha*. Established in *bhavamukha*, in obedience to the command of the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna could see unity underlying multiplicity. For the common people, however, it is a mystery how these apparently contradictory forms and states are blended harmoniously in a single personality.

God and Man

About the nature of divine incarnations Sri Ramakrishna would say: 'When God incarnates, all of His actions become like those of ordinary humans. He assumes a human body and attains perfection through zeal, self-effort, and austerity like other human beings' (150). He also referred to the life of Sri Ramachandra: 'Don't you see how bitterly Rama wept for Sita? "Brahman weeps, ensnared in the meshes of maya."²

Swami Saradananda provides some valuable insights that help us understand this blend of human and divine natures in the divine incarnation. He says that without regarding an avatara as human, one cannot make any sense of his life and actions.³ It was his firm conviction that by acceptance of both the aspects, human and divine, of the incarnations we would be greatly benefited: 'If we do not think of him as one of us, we shall not be able to find meaning in the superhuman enthusiasm and effort he made at the time of his *sadhana*' (151-2). That is why he described Sri Ramakrishna as *deva-manava*, God-man.

Bhairavi Brahmani had a divine commission to guide Sri Ramakrishna in his tantric *sadhana*. She also had two other disciples, Chandra and Girija, who lived in East Bengal, now Bangladesh. With the Master's permission Brahmani had Chandra come over to Dakshineswar, though the Master was not informed about this. Brahmani and Chandra were engaged in a conversa-

tion when the Master happened to approach. After saying a word or two the Master went into a trance and exclaimed: 'Ah, here is Chandra! Is this not Chandra?' Then he became motionless. Chandra took hold of his hands and roused him from *samadhi* by calling aloud his name three or four times.

Chandra: 'You seem to know me. Why did you forget me so long?'

Master: 'It was the will of God.'

Chandra: 'You are God himself; then why do you forget?'

Master: 'Forgetfulness is inevitable when one is embodied.'⁴

Unschoolled, yet Wise

Sri Ramakrishna had only a limited schooling. When his elder brother Ramkumar, who brought him to Calcutta for his education, admonished him for neglecting his studies, he replied: 'I do not want to pursue a bread-winning education. I want an education that helps one manifest right knowledge and find true fulfillment in life.'⁵ This was a remarkable reply for a boy of his age.

Sri Ramakrishna would say: 'You know I am a fool. I know nothing.'⁶ Yet, learned people like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshabchandra Sen, Vijaykrishna Goswami, and Mahendralal Sarkar would spend hours listening to his simple but profound words of wisdom. Once Narendranath, later Swami Vivekananda, referred to the bhakta's faith of God with form as 'blind faith'. Sri Ramakrishna was quick to point out the incongruity: 'Well, can you explain what you mean by "blind faith"? Faith is always blind. Has faith eyes? Either simply say "faith", or say "knowledge".'⁷ Such insightful comments frequently issued from his lips.

Though he had shunned formal schooling, Sri Ramakrishna would tell the devotees, 'As long as I live so long do I learn.' He had a curious mind

that was keen to learn about such matters as the cause of tides and the principles of photography. Eager to see things for himself, Sri Ramakrishna visited the Calcutta zoo and museum. He was a great lover of knowledge.

Of the World and of God

In the introduction to his book the *Silent Life*, Thomas Merton defines a monk as 'a man of God'. Sri Ramakrishna's life shows us that the states of *nitya*, the eternal, and *lila*, the sportive, are aspects of the same Reality. All that exists is verily the Divine Mother herself. The world is the sportive manifestation of the *nitya*. The highest possible experiences in the spiritual realm—ecstasy, visions, samadhi—as well as the manners, etiquette, actions, and reactions of the mundane day-to-day life were seamlessly harmonized in his person.

It was 11 March 1885. Sri Ramakrishna was conversing with the devotees assembled at Balam's house in Calcutta. As dusk fell Sri Ramakrishna stopped speaking and started a prayer addressed to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother, I throw myself on Thy mercy; I take shelter at Thy Hallowed Feet. ... Be gracious, Mother, and out of Thy infinite mercy grant me love for Thy Lotus Feet.' M, the chronicler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, writes: 'Every word of this prayer, uttered from the depths of his soul, stirred the minds of the devotees. The melody of his voice and the childlike simplicity of his face touched their hearts very deeply.'⁸

No sooner had he finished the prayer than Girish importunately invited him to his house, which was very near Balam's. Sri Ramakrishna readied himself to leave for Girish's residence at 9.00 p.m. As Balam had arranged for his supper, the Master said to him: 'Please send the food you have prepared for me to Girish's. I shall enjoy it there.' He did not want to hurt Balam's feel-

ings. As he was coming down to the ground floor, he entered into ecstasy. He looked as though he were drunk. Soon after reaching the ground floor he was totally overwhelmed. Narayan came forward to hold him lest he should fall down, but Sri Ramakrishna was annoyed at this. After a while he said to Narayan: 'If you hold me by the hand people may think I am drunk. I shall walk by myself' (ibid.).

Here we see a person passing through a series of apparently contrasting experiences, moving back and forth between the spiritual and material planes in such a natural way that left most people wonderstruck. His contemporaries found it remarkable that Sri Ramakrishna could enter into ecstasy now and be alert enough the next moment to accept a devotee's invitation, take care of another devotee's feelings a minute later and also be cautious enough to avoid public criticism.

A Man of Principles and Good Manners

Sri Ramakrishna was an exemplar of good human behaviour. His disciple Swami Premananda described the following incident to Bibhuti Ghosh and told him how the Master taught them moral lessons:

It was half-past one at night. I was asked to fetch fire in a chillum [an earthen bowl]. Hazra was out on the veranda and there was fire in a pot nearby. I went there to collect some burning embers, and was a little late returning, so Thakur asked, 'Why are you so late?' I explained, 'Hazra was asking Rakhal: "Do you come here just to gulp *rasagollas* [a juicy sweet]? Unless you ask for it, he will not give you anything.'" Placing the earthen bowl on the hubble-bubble, Thakur said, 'Let's go and listen to what they are saying.' He went to the door, but as he tried to raise his right foot to cross the threshold, the foot would not budge. He then said, 'One must not eavesdrop.'

Sri Ramakrishna was ever alert about not hurting anyone. He always stood for freedom and was averse from his very childhood to the idea of accepting an employment, which he deemed to be a cause of bondage. His biographers mention that he would not think highly of a person who willingly accepted an employment when not in dire need. That his elder brother Ramkumar had accepted service as pujari to the Divine Mother Bhavatarini in the newly constructed temple at Dakshineswar caused much pain to Sri Ramakrishna. Unavoidable circumstances led him to stay with his brother at the Kali temple. It is also well known that Sri Ramakrishna was uncompromisingly truthful; but the straightforwardness born of truth did not lead him into hurting others unnecessarily. Thus, when he was earnestly requested to officiate as Mother Kali's priest by Mathur Babu, who agreed to meet all his preconditions, Sri Ramakrishna consented to do so.

Sri Ramakrishna could also manage awkward situations and put his interlocutors at ease with exquisite humour. Once, while he was visiting the devout Adharlal Sen, the famous author Bankimchandra Chatterjee started discussing the Master's explanation of Sri Krishna's form with his friends in English. Sri Ramakrishna asked them what they were talking about. On being told the details he smiled and proceeded to tell the story of the gentleman who cried 'damn' when he was accidentally hurt while being shaven by a barber. The barber put his razor aside, tucked up his sleeves, and said: 'You said "damn" to me. Now you must tell me its meaning.' The gentleman tried to reassure him that it didn't mean anything in particular, but the barber would not let him off so easily. He said, 'If "damn" means something good, then I am a "damn", my father is a "damn", and all my ancestors are "damns". But if it means something bad, then you are a "damn", your father is a "damn",

and all your ancestors are "damns". They are not only "damns", but "damn—damn—damn—damn—damn—damn".'¹⁰ As everyone present burst out laughing, the Master had made his point that it was not proper to speak to a group in a language that is foreign to anyone present.

Immensely Practical

Though Sri Ramakrishna had first-hand experience of the world beyond, he would not remain indifferent to the hard realities of our day-to-day life. He would say to his visitors: 'Man's worries over bread and butter are simply amazing; they make even Kalidasa lose his wits' (727). During the rainy season Sri Ramakrishna would go to Kamarpukur, his native village. One day he was sitting in the small parlour in front of his house and conversing with the people of the village. Seeing his niece Lakshmi enter the house, Sri Ramakrishna asked her, 'O Lakshmi, where did you go?'

Lakshmi (*with sobs*): 'I went to Mukundapur to buy some rice. But I couldn't.'

Sri Ramakrishna: 'Alas! How much people in the world suffer.' ... (to Lakshmi's mother): 'Is the rice running short?'

Lakshmi's mother: 'The (fine variety of) rice meant for you is there. But there's no rice for us.'

Sri Ramakrishna: 'Today you cook the fine rice and offer it to Raghuvir and Mother Sitala. All of us will take that as prasad.'

Sri Ramakrishna then sent for a villager named Gangavishnu and asked him to buy some farmland as early as possible. Gangavishnu was not very optimistic; he said: 'It is the rainy season now; this purchase can be made in spring.' Sri Ramakrishna would not take this argument: 'Is there a dearth of crows if rice is thrown around? One who is in need of money will agree to sell his land right now. If we have to pay ten rupees extra, so be it.'

With Gangavishnu's help one and a half bigha of land was purchased in Dompara at a cost of seventy-nine rupees. A further fourteen bighas were procured at Sihore through Hriday. Sri Ramakrishna went to Goghat by palanquin to have these plots registered. The two pieces of land were registered in the name of Raghuvir, with Ramakrishna Chattopadhyay and his heirs as *sewayats*, caretakers. On return to Kamarpukur, Sri Ramakrishna said to Lakshmi: 'Your sufferings are over! No more have you to go to Mukundapur for rice.'¹¹

A pandit had come to Calcutta from some place in North India. He visited Sri Ramakrishna at the house of Ramchandra Datta, one of the foremost disciples of the Master. Sri Ramakrishna introduced the pandit to Mahendranath Gupta and other devotees assembled there, say-

ing that he was a great student of the Bhagavata. There arose discussions about Yogamaya, the difference between Sri Radhika and Yogamaya, and such issues. When the pandit was about to take leave Sri Ramakrishna asked him tenderly: 'Have you earned anything?' 'The market is very dull. I've earned nothing,' replied the pandit. After he had left the Master expressed his concern to the devotees: 'You see how great the difference is between worldly people and the youngsters? This pandit has been worrying about money day and night. He has come to Calcutta to earn money; otherwise his people at home will have nothing to eat. So he has to knock at different doors. When will he concentrate his mind on God?'¹²

Deep Concern for Others

Early in life Sri Ramakrishna was overwhelmed by an uncontrollable urge to see God. And he saw the Supreme Being by following various paths. During his sadhana, he would remain perpetually in God-consciousness. But after his sadhanas were over, he dedicated himself to the service of humanity. He was full of concern for others.

Mahendranath Gupta, the chronicler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, had been visiting Sri Ramakrishna for about a month when he was unable to go to Dakshineswar for some time due to personal reasons. The Master happened to visit Keshabchandra Sen at his home in Calcutta and saw Mahendranath seated amidst the group of devotees assembled there. So he requested Keshab to ask Mahendranath why he had stopped going to Dakshineswar despite giving repeated assurances that he was not attached to his wife and children. Sri Ramakrishna had even told Mahendranath to write to him in case of a delay in coming (94-5).

Mahendranath reports that whenever Sri Ramakrishna happened to see people suffering



IMAGE: PAINTING OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA BY SWAMI TADATMANANDA

owing to a lack of food and clothing, he would implore the Divine Mother to put an end to their miseries. He used to say that worries about food and clothing prevented the mind from resting in God. Therefore, if any devotee happened to be without work, the Master would request other devotees to provide him with one.¹³ Kishori, one of the devotees, had several children. His salary was too small to support his family. Naran promised to find a job for Kishori. The *Gospel* records Sri Ramakrishna asking Mahendranth to remind Naran of the matter.¹⁴

Sri Ramakrishna once started telling a man visiting him about the means to improve the condition of one's family and about one's worldly responsibilities. 'This I get to hear everywhere,' the man protested, 'please speak a few words about God.' 'My boy! Now I am telling this,' Sri Ramakrishna replied. 'You may go away if you do not like it.' On enquiry the devotees learnt that the man had no job, his family was without food, and a daughter of marriageable age was at home. Sri Ramakrishna, with his yogic insight, saw that spiritual instruction to such a person would be useless. He needed advice about work and family responsibilities.¹⁵

A Progressive Mind

Sri Ramakrishna is considered the patron saint of the Bengal stage. His pictures can be seen in Kolkata theatres even now—in the green room, in the drawing room, and in some of the private dressing rooms of actors. Even today, before going onstage, actors and actresses bow down before the Master's picture and some of them wave lights before it. His picture is decorated with a garland before every performance.

Girishchandra Ghosh, the bohemian devotee of the Master, was responsible for all this. Through him Sri Ramakrishna exerted a great influence on Bengal theatre and its actors and

actresses. Girish, Binodini, Tarasundari, Tinkari, and many others were blessed by Sri Ramakrishna and had their lives completely transformed. Before Sri Ramakrishna's association with them, theatres in Bengal and people working there were condemned by the Brahmo Samaj, orthodox Hindu society, and other groups. No person conscious of one's civic sense and aristocracy would visit the theatres of Calcutta in the nineteenth century, till Sri Ramakrishna started visiting Girish's theatres. His first viewing of Girish's drama *Chaitanyalila* on 24 September 1884 at the Star Theatre was a shocking event for many conservative men and women of Calcutta. Some considered Sri Ramakrishna's subsequent visits to the theatre and his interactions with the people there unpardonable. Ramchandra Datta was one among them. He did not join the Master in his first visit to the Star Theatre, though he was in the habit of accompanying him to other places. Shivanath Shastri, a Brahmo leader, stopped visiting Sri Ramakrishna because of the latter's association with the 'immoral people' of the theatre.¹⁶

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* records Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards the theatre and its participants:

Sri Ramakrishna was planning to go to a performance of the *Chaitanyalila* at the Star Theatre. ... Some of the devotees said that public women took part in the play. They took the parts of Nimai, Nitai, and others.

Master (*to the devotees*): 'I shall look upon them as the Blissful Mother Herself. What if one of them acts the part of Chaitanya? An imitation custard-apple reminds one of the real fruit.'¹⁷

The caste system still hinders the growth of Hindu society in India. Many thinkers have suggested various remedies for the divisions it

creates. According to Sri Ramakrishna, sincere devotion to God could eradicate caste distinctions. He said: 'The caste-system can be removed by one means only, and that is the love of God. Lovers of God do not belong to any caste. The mind, body, and soul of a man become purified through divine love' (155).

Providing the simile of a tender plant needing a fence for protection from cattle, he would explain the necessity of protective measures at the beginning of one's spiritual life. However, as and when the spiritual relationship with God matures, narrow restrictions fall off from a devotee. He then emerges as an embodiment of catholicity. Sri Ramakrishna was himself the best exemplar of this teaching. Owing to his steadfastness in food habits based on caste restrictions he inherited, Sri Ramakrishna found it difficult to stay with his elder brother at Dakshineswar during his early days there. But as he advanced in spiritual life, this and other restrictions dropped off naturally.

On 6 September 1884 Sri Ramakrishna went to the house of Adharlal Sen in Calcutta. Adhar had prepared a feast for the Master and the devotees. He requested the devotees to partake of the meal. Adhar belonged to a low caste. The Mukherji brothers, who were present there, hesitated to dine at the house of a non-brahmana. The Master entreated the Mukherji brothers to accept the invitation. When they tried excusing themselves he remarked: 'But why? You are doing everything else. Why this hesitation only about eating the meal?' How the Mukherji brothers reacted to this question is not known. But Mahendranth notes: 'Some of the brahmin devotees hesitated to eat at his [Adhar's] house. They came to their senses at last when they saw Sri Ramakrishna himself eating' (511). After a few weeks we find the Master requesting Kedar, another brahmana devotee, to have dinner at

Adhar's house. Though he was hesitant in the beginning, Kedar conceded the request at last and had food there along with Sri Ramakrishna and other devotees.

In reply to a question about food Sri Ramakrishna said to Kedar: 'One can eat food even from an untouchable if the untouchable is a devotee of God. After spending seven years in a God-intoxicated state at Dakshineswar, I visited Kamarpukur. Oh, what a state of mind I was in at that time! Even a prostitute fed me with her own hands' (576-7).

Sri Ramakrishna received the first alms after his *upanayana*, investiture with sacred thread, from Dhani, a blacksmith woman considered socially low. This was not a stray incident, the result of a personal whim, for Sri Ramakrishna had deep and steady love and also great respect for Dhani throughout his life. On another occasion the boy Gadadhar cleverly entered Dhani's hut, snatched away a delicious dish prepared by her, and came out eating it in spite of her scoldings. Girishchandra Ghosh tells us that the blessed Dhani breathed her last in the presence of Sri Ramakrishna uttering the Lord's name 'Hari'.¹⁸

High Nobility

Culture underlies civilization. It is the 'noblemen' of society who have been traditionally considered as makers of civilization from its cultural components. But what is nobility? Sri Ramakrishna says: 'Mere possession of money doesn't make a nobleman. One sign of the mansion of a nobleman is that all the rooms are lighted.' A noble person ought to rise above the sordid machinations of the world and does not leave the shrine of the body dark but 'illumine[s] it with the lamp of wisdom'.¹⁹

Sri Ramakrishna possessed a big heart. He scolded Narendranath for asking to be blessed by him with absolute detachment from the world

and to remain absorbed in the blissful state of samadhi like Shukadeva. 'Shame on you!' the Master said, 'Your's is such a big personality, and you speak such words! I had thought that you would be like a big banyan tree, and that thousands of people would rest in your shade; instead, you are seeking your own liberation. This is a very trivial and mean talk. No, don't make your vision so narrow.'²⁰

Petty minds cannot free themselves from such dualities as pleasures and pains, vice and virtue; they suffer from the fear, tension, and worries of this life and the lives to come. Only a hero can throw all these away and try to develop love for love's sake. A Vaishnava devotee asked Sri Ramakrishna if a man was born again. He also demanded eyewitness evidence. To this the Master replied: 'I don't know about that, my dear sir. ... What you are talking about only shows your petty mind. Try to cultivate love of God. You are born as a human being only to attain divine love. ... You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard.'²¹

The ability to see and highlight positive qualities in others is a great virtue. Once Mathur Babu was entangled in a lawsuit. He requested Sri Ramakrishna to offer a flower to the Divine Mother, hoping for a favourable outcome through divine grace. Sri Ramakrishna offered it unsuspectingly. Though the Master later came to know of Mathur's motive, he appreciated Mathur's firm faith that he would attain his objective if the Master offered the flower to the Mother (348).

The Divine Child

Sri Ramakrishna was an ever-blissful child of the Divine Mother. Romain Rolland writes: 'Certainly, he remained throughout his life

the Bambino whose lips drank the milk of the Mother.'²² His remarkable childlike traits included unfathomable simplicity, absolute dependence on the Divine Mother, unstudied faith, unassuming curiosity, and natural purity.

Sri Ramakrishna was twenty-eight when he practised Advaita Vedanta under the wandering monk Tota Puri. When Tota Puri first saw him at the Chandni Ghat in Dakshineswar, he was amazed to discern in him an extraordinarily competent student of Vedanta. He approached Sri Ramakrishna and asked him: 'It seems you are an excellent spiritual aspirant. Would you like to practise Vedanta?' Sri Ramakrishna replied: 'I don't know what to do or not to do. My Mother knows everything. If She commands it, then I will undertake the practice.' He then went to the Kali temple, merged into ecstasy, and received the Divine Mother's command: 'Go and learn. It is to teach you that the monk has come here.' Sri Ramakrishna returned to Tota with a

We intently watched Ramakrishna Paramahansa in Samādhi. The whole body relaxed and then became slightly rigid. There was no twitching of the muscles or nerves, no movement of any limb. Both his hands lay in his lap with the fingers lightly interlocked. The sitting posture of the body (Āsana) was easy but absolutely motionless. The face was slightly tilted up and in repose. The eyes were nearly but not wholly closed. The eyeballs were not turned up or otherwise deflected, but they were fixed and conveyed no message of outer objects to the brain. The lips were parted in a beatific and indescribable smile, disclosing the gleam of the white teeth. There was something in that wonderful smile which no photograph was ever able to reproduce.

—Nagendranath Gupta, 'A Day with Ramakrishna Paramahansa', in *A Bridge to Eternity*, 80

smiling face and informed him of the Mother's command. Only then did Tota realize that by 'Mother' Sri Ramakrishna meant the Goddess in the temple. But Tota attributed such behaviour to ignorance and superstition, as he did not believe in a personal God and in divine grace. Therefore, when Sri Ramakrishna informed him of the Mother's approval to practise Vedanta, Tota had 'a little smile of pity and disdain' on his lips. But at the same time he was charmed by Sri Ramakrishna's childlike simplicity.²³

Love Personified

Swami Vivekananda tested Sri Ramakrishna in innumerable ways, only to surrender himself to the Master. Such total surrender on the part of a giant personality is indeed mysterious. It is believed that this was possible only as a result of Sri Ramakrishna's boundless love. This love was never conditioned by the distinctions commonly seen in the mundane world. His love flowed even to those who reviled him. Akshay Kumar Sen has given a graphic account of the Master's love for a man who did not like him and would always vilify him.

The Master was then staying at Shyampukur. The vilifier's young son fell ill. The man called in many physicians of Calcutta, but to no avail. All of them gave no hope of recovery for the young boy, whose condition was critical. The father wanted to bring the famous doctor Mahendralal Sarkar, under whose treatment the Master was placed, to treat his son. The man went to the doctor's house and entreated him to see his son. But Dr Sarkar was then very busy with the Master's treatment. He liked spending time with the Master. So he paid no attention to the man's request and got into a carriage to visit the Master. The father began to run after the doctor's carriage. After a while both of them reached Shyampukur. With his mind full of

shame and fear, the man found himself standing in front of the Master, who was surrounded by other devotees.

The Master asked the man the reason for his visit and was told about his son's critical condition. Hearing his words the Master began to shed tears and said: 'I am old and have an ordinary pain in my throat. ... I can imagine how painful is the suffering of your young child.' He then requested the doctor to go and treat the child first. Seeing the Master's all-embracing compassion and love, the man's heart melted. He began recalling all his past abuses and, with tears rolling down his cheeks, repeatedly requested the Master to pardon him.²⁴

Mahatma Gandhi made a small but very meaningful comment in his introduction to the *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*: 'His [Sri Ramakrishna's] love knew no limits, geographical or otherwise.' This divine love has proved a balm to many wounded souls.

Is It Possible?

Sri Ramakrishna lived a comparatively short life, spanning a little over fifty years. He spent twelve years in the practice of the sadhanas of various faiths and sects. Plunging into the ocean of spiritual practice he forgot the external world. This practising the spiritual ways of different religious traditions in one lifetime is indeed unprecedented. He attained perfection in the paths he practised in an incredibly short time—several of them in only three days. At the conclusion of this Herculean effort, he gifted a unique and unprecedented message: '*Yato mat tato path*; as many faiths so many paths.'

While practising the religious disciplines of various faiths, one after another, Sri Ramakrishna accepted different persons as gurus for different sadhanas. In his practice of Vedanta, Tota Puri was his guru. A liberated soul, indif-

ferent to the world, he intended moving about the sacred places of pilgrimage for the rest of his life. On his way to Gangasagar at the mouth of the Ganga, Tota Puri stopped for three days at Dakshineswar. He initiated Sri Ramakrishna into sannyasa and made a concerted effort to have him established in the state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, beyond all names, forms, and actions. Sri Ramakrishna had little difficulty in withdrawing his mind from all objects except one, the radiant form of the blissful Divine Mother. With the help of his guru, however, he managed to transcend even this 'hurdle' and passed into the ineffable *nirvikalpa samadhi*, in which all the senses and the mind stop functioning and

the body appears like a corpse. Tota Puri kept vigil for three days and yet there was no sign of life in Sri Ramakrishna, though his countenance was serene and radiant. He was dead to the world. With breathless wonder Tota Puri said to himself: 'Is it really true? Is it possible that this man has attained in the course of a single day that which took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve?' He repeatedly touched the disciple's corpse-like body and exclaimed in joyous wonder, 'Great God, it is nothing short of a miracle!'²⁵ Slowly Sri Ramakrishna regained consciousness of the outside world. The guru answered the worthy disciple's prostration by locking him in a warm embrace.

Will You Twist My Ears?

Sri Ramakrishna was suffering from cancer in Kashipur. Ramchandra Datta knew the famous physician of Kolkata, Kailaschandra Basu. Ramchandra went to Dr Kailas to request him to examine Sri Ramakrishna. Hearing Ramchandra speak about the greatness of his guru, Kailas Basu said, 'Look Ram, you people make a mountain out of a molehill. On seeing someone's goodness, you do not rest till you proclaim that person a "Paramahamsa" or an "incarnation". Also, you want to prove that you are great devotees and reputed people. On the one hand you say "Paramahamsadeva", "incarnation", and on the other you say that there is a deadly wound in his throat which needs to be examined. Indeed, the Paramahamsa has to be an incarnation and be afflicted with cancer too! Had it been me, I would have twisted the ears of such a Paramahamsa or incarnation.'


Pained on hearing this, Ramchandra said, 'Brother, one should not talk caustically about such a great soul. If one does so, it brings ill-fortune to both the speaker and the listener.' Dr Kailas asked Ramchandra's pardon and arrived at Kashipur in a

horse-carriage. As soon as both of them reached the ghat of the pond [at the Kashipur garden-house], Sri Ramakrishna sent an attendant to call the physician. When both Ramchandra and Dr Kailas went to his room, Sri Ramakrishna saluted the doctor and asked, 'Hello doctor, will you first treat me or twist my ears? Which will you do first?' On hearing these words a shudder passed through Dr Kailas's inner being. He understood that this Paramahamsa was certainly the omniscient Bhagavan. Otherwise, when there was none other than him and Ramchandra in the horse-carriage, how did Sri Ramakrishna know [what had transpired between them]? He said to Sri Ramakrishna, 'Kindly pardon my mistake. Please do not make me feel further ashamed of the offence I committed unknowingly.' He examined Sri Ramakrishna's disease with great dedication and became his devotee forever. His pride was shattered. Later, he would never go out of his house without saluting the Master's photograph.

—Swami Chetanananda,
Sri Ramakrishner Sannidhye, 120–1

Life Is a Harmony

A traditional Vedantin is eager to run away from the clutches of maya. But in Sri Ramakrishna we have a unique Vedantin welcoming maya. One day Gauri Ma, one of the women disciples of the Master, saw Sri Ramakrishna standing on the veranda of his room at Dakshineswar, facing the Ganga. Waving his hands, he was calling out repeatedly: 'Come maya, come maya, come maya.' Becoming curious, Gauri Ma asked him: 'What's the matter? You are inviting maya with great enthusiasm!' Sri Ramakrishna was a bit embarrassed and replied: 'Couldn't you follow? Nowadays my mind constantly tends to rise towards higher spheres; I fail to bring it down in spite of repeated efforts. That's why I am inviting maya, so that, entangled in maya, I may remain in the company of the boy devotees for some more days, forgetting (the transcendental realm).'²⁶

Maya for Sri Ramakrishna was the Divine Mother herself. So he was not afraid of staying in this mundane world, not even to be reborn thousands of times. He said: 'Let me be condemned to be born over and over again, even in the form of a dog, if so I can be of help to a single soul!'²⁷ This extraordinary attitude was born of his vision of God in every being and every object. This vision led him to realize the harmony underlying the multifarious world. He has said, 'He is indeed a real man who has harmonized everything.'²⁸ This message of harmony, which he embodied, is one of Sri Ramakrishna's greatest contributions to the world. 

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Traditions and Influences



Dashavatara and Ramakrishna

Swami Brahmeshananda

Whenever, O descendant of Bharata, righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I incarnate myself. For the protection of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of religion, I come into being from age to age.¹

God in His infinite love wants to make you happy and healthy. For this reason you call Him Father, Mother, Friend. Yet we find it impossible to go to Him. But He has such infinite love that He comes to us; yet, just as a blind man cannot see the forms about him, so we do not see God. He has come to us in the form of our mothers and fathers, in the form of our teachers, in the form of our Sastras, but especially in the form of Avatars.²

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA CONSIDERS avatars to be *nara-deva*, human beings having divine characteristics and status: ‘The theory of incarnation is the first link in the chain of ideas leading to the recognition of oneness of God and man.’³ According to the Hindu belief, God, out of his infinite mercy, has incarnated nine times, in the forms of: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Ramachandra, Krishna, and Buddha. Kalki, the tenth incarnation, is yet to come. While these are the commonly cited ten incarnations of God, there are also certain variations. In one of his hymns, the famous poet-saint Jayadeva substitutes Balarama for Krishna, since according to him and the Vaishnava trad-

ition, Krishna is God himself, the one who takes various forms according to the times and needs.

Swami Abhedananda, in his hymn *Sri Ramakrishnavatara Stotram*, extends the avatara list to include both Balarama and Krishna, as well as later prophets like Chaitanya, Shankaracharya, Muhammad, and Jesus Christ. Moreover, Abhedananda states that all these were incarnations of Ramakrishna, this was in tune with his spiritual experience and in accordance with Gauri Pandit’s statement that: ‘You are He, from a part of whom the Incarnations come down to the world from age to age to do good to humanity.’⁴

Although some of the incarnations, in either of the lists, are mythological, their stories are symbolic and convey a deep psychological and spiritual message. In this article we shall try and study the lessons conveyed by the stories of the avatars in the light of Ramakrishna’s life and teachings.

Matsyavatara

It is narrated in several Puranas that God incarnated for the first time in the form of a *matsya*, fish, as there was a great deluge at that time and that form suited him best. Once while Brahma was reciting the Vedas ... Hayagriva, an asura, stole the Vedas from the side of Brahma and with them went ... to the bottom of the ocean.⁵ According to Swami Ramakrishnananda, the deluge was a punishment to the whole population for having become perverse. Only the sage Manu and his family were spared.⁶

Vivekananda says about Ramakrishna’s advent: ‘But in the past, no new-moon night of sorrow veiled this holy land with such a dense darkness as

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at present. That night is all but gone, it being now at the fag end of its last quarter. However, the last fall of the country has been, as it were, to the bottom of the ocean, whereas, by comparison, all previous falls have been but into the hoof-marks of a cow.⁷ Ramakrishna incarnated during a deluge of darkness in order to dispel it.

Coming back to the story, a small fish approached Manu and sought his protection. Manu kept it in his *kamandalu*, water pot. The next day it had grown large so as to occupy the whole *kamandalu*. Manu, therefore, put it into a larger pot. The fish, however, went on growing rapidly and Manu too went on transferring it to larger and larger receptacles till, finally, he released it into the ocean. The huge fish then revealed its divine nature and warned of the imminent deluge. It advised Manu to build a boat, put into it pairs of all the various living species, fasten the boat to the horn of the fish and board it with his family. Manu and the pairs of living plants, birds, animals, and the like were thus saved. After the waters had subsided he came out and populated the earth. God, in his fish incarnation, also recovered the Vedas.

In other incarnations, as we shall see, the gods prayed to Bhagavan Vishnu for help and protection, and only then did he incarnate. In this incarnation no one had prayed, but his compassion made him take the form of a tiny fish. There is a great lesson behind this story: God can indeed make himself a humble supplicant and test us. One is reminded of Ramakrishna's extraordinary humility. Whenever he met anyone for the first time, it was he who first bowed, even before the other had the chance to do so. Interestingly, Ramakrishna too once protected a fish that was swimming round his feet, seeking his protection as it were, as he was wading through a flooded lane in Kamarpukur. Ramakrishna slowly guided the fish to a big pond and thus protected it.

We cannot say whether God incarnated this time at the earnest prayers of the gods or the devotees. But it is sure that the decline of righteousness and the unprecedented rise of evil forces of lust and greed in the present age would have destroyed religion. That same God incarnated as Ramakrishna, who is called *veda-murti*, the embodiment of the Vedas. Vivekananda said: 'Without studying Ramakrishna Paramahansa first, one can never understand the real import of the Vedas, the Vedanta, of the *Bhagavata* and the other Puranas. ... He was the living commentary to the Vedas and to their aim.'⁸ This time too, Bhagavan as Ramakrishna has rescued the Vedas and saved religion.

Kurmavatara

The story of God's incarnation as a *kurma*, tortoise, is elaborate and symbolically significant. While in the Matsyavatara there was no clear demarcation between demons and gods, the vicious and the virtuous, the story of Kurmavatara begins with the recognition of good and evil at various levels. As it generally happens, evil prevails upon good. The gods were defeated by the demons and consequently decided to seek the divine nectar for immortality and invincibility. Sometimes defeat is a blessing in disguise that leads to greater good. Bhagavan as Kurmavatara, therefore, encouraged them to churn the ocean and obtain nectar therefrom. Gods and demons are not only external realities, the two tendencies—divine and demonic—are always present within, producing a constant tug of war in the ocean of the human mind. Like the ocean the human mind too is a storehouse of many gems, even nectar, as well as dangerous creatures and poison. Ramakrishna used to sing a song in which the mind is described as an ocean of beauty, *rup-sagar*, diving into which one may get the jewel of divine love.

The churning of the ocean as described in the

mythological story symbolically represents the process of diving within one's own heart, till one reaches the level of immortality represented by *amrita*, ambrosia. However, this churning can only be done with the help of the rod of the ego. After all, the ego is the only stable element amidst the ever-changing good and evil tendencies of the mind. This ego ought to be based on the Divine. Ramakrishna has repeatedly advised that the ego must be united with God, so that it becomes 'ripe' and no more remains the 'unripe' ego that we usually have. Even then, there is every possibility of the ego becoming inflated. In the story this is represented by the Kurmavata supporting the churning rod on its back and prevented its rising by sitting on it in the form of an eagle.

Swami Virajananda has eulogized Ramakrishna as: '*dambhi-darpa-daranam*; destroyer of the pride of the haughty.' Indeed, on more than one occasion Ramakrishna crushed the ego of those who came to him. The most striking example is that of Mahendranath Gupta, 'M', whose pride was destroyed for ever by a few telling rebukes from Ramakrishna during one of M's earliest visits to Dakshineswar.

The story of the churning of the ocean by the gods and the demons does not come to an end with obtaining the nectar of immortality. God had to incarnate again as Mohini, a strikingly beautiful woman, to prevent the demons from drinking that nectar. Ramakrishna too, in various ways, subdued the evil tendencies of his disciples.

Varahavatara

That the ego can cause havoc is evident from the story in the next two incarnations of God. Vishnu's doorkeepers Jaya and Vijaya belonged to Bhagavan's inner circle. Out of pride they insulted the sages Sanaka and others and were cursed by them to be born as demons. They were born as Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu, and

God had to assume the form of a *varaha*, boar, and *nara-simha*, a man-lion, to destroy and liberate them from the curse.

In these legends also there is a great lesson for all spiritual aspirants. However advanced one may be in spiritual life—even to the extent of becoming a member of the inner circle of Vishnu—one may still have a fall. Eternal vigilance is the price one pays as long as one does not merge into the absolute non-dual Reality.

Jaya and Vijaya in their incarnations as demons had the erroneous notion that Bhagavan Vishnu resides only in Vaikuntha, his divine abode. They did not know that he is all-pervading. To teach them a lesson, Bhagavan came out of the nose of Brahma as a boar and out of a pillar as a man-lion. Ramakrishna also repeatedly emphasized the all-pervasiveness of the one Reality. He would actually see God existing within and without everything; he saw God even in inanimate objects.

These stories highlight the idea that good and bad, dharma and adharma are not two watertight entities. Jaya and Vijaya, though righteous, were transformed into unrighteous demons. In the same vein, Ramakrishna has advised us to transcend both good and evil, dharma and adharma. Remove the thorn of *avidya*, ignorance, with the help of the thorn of *vidya*, knowledge, and then throw both away.

These episodes have one more objective: to show that God can be reached through the path of *dvesha-bhakti*, devotion manifest as enmity. According to the Bhagavata, this is a faster way to reach God, though only a rare few are competent to follow it. So far as Ramakrishna is concerned, he never advocated this type of bhakti. He only taught and recommended the conventional five modes of bhakti, with special emphasis on *apatya-bhava*, considering God as father or, still better, as mother.

‘Hiranya’ means gold and is intimately associated with greed and the consequent delusion, anger, and pride. Ramakrishna totally renounced *kanchana*, gold; he thus symbolically killed both Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu.

As the story goes, Hiranyaksha stole the earth. Bhagavan assumed the form of a boar to search for the missing earth as this was the best-suited body, which has a strong sense of smell. The boar is considered a symbol of yajna, sacrificial rite, and the various parts of its body are equated with the various aspects of yajnas.

Yajna is a very important characteristic of Hindu religious practice. Various types of yajnas have been described in different Hindu scriptures, including the Bhagavadgita. The essential aspect of yajna is ‘giving’. The whole of Creation, according to Hinduism, is based on the wheel of yajna, in which every sacrificial act is interconnected with the other in a relationship of giving. According to the Gita, one who does not contribute his or her part in this cycle of giving, and yet wants to enjoy, is a thief. Hiranyaksha wanted to enjoy the earth all by himself, by sheer animal force. Hence, Bhagavan incarnated as *yajna-rupa-varaha*, yajna in the form of boar, so that the cosmic order could be re-established. In the present era a similar situation has arisen: everyone wants to acquire goods without giving and contributing to the cosmic cycle. Ramakrishna has, therefore, taught a novel yajna: *shiva jnane jiva seva*, service to man as God. The spirit of yajna for the modern times has been beautifully summarized by Vivekananda: ‘In the world take always the position of the giver. Give everything and look for no return. Give love, give help, give service, give any little thing you can, but *keep out barter*. Make no conditions, and none will be imposed. Let us give out of our own bounty, just as God gives to us.’¹⁰

Narasimha

Hiranyakashipu is considered the *adi-daitya*, the first and foremost among the demons. The word for demon is ‘asura’—one who considers himself *asu*, ‘life’ or ‘body’. In other words, the primary characteristic of demon-hood is considering oneself a physical entity, having *dehatma-buddhi*, body-consciousness. The rest of the demonical qualities, as described in the sixteenth chapter of the Gita, arise out of this primary error: ‘Hiranyakashipu represents the highest development of egoism. The first personal pronoun “I” was developed in him as far as it can be developed. He was so very powerful that he brought the whole universe under his control; but his egotism blinded him in regard to the fact that it was finite and perishable, and an ego that is finite, compared to the ego of the Lord, must be infinitesimally insignificant.’¹¹

Hiranyakashipu was an enemy of his son Prahlada, who was a great devotee of Vishnu. Bhagavan incarnated as a man-lion to fulfil the boon that Brahma had granted the demon. The lion is the best among animals and a symbol of courage and power. Vivekananda once meditated upon the heart of a lion. In Sanskrit and Hindi the words *nara-simha* and *nara-kesari* are used to refer to the best among men. Ramakrishna was very careful to keep his word and always fulfil promises. He was indeed *nara-simha*, best among men. However, whereas Vishnu’s incarnation as Narasimha was full of anger, Ramakrishna hardly ever became angry, and even if he did, it was short-lived. Certainly, he was as affectionate towards the devotees as Narasimha was towards Prahlada.

After killing Hiranyakashipu, Narasimha asked Prahlada for a boon. Prahlada prayed only for pure devotion. Ramakrishna was the strongest advocate of pure, desireless devotion. He used to pray, ‘Mother, give me pure devotion.’



After killing Hiranyakashipu, Narasimha asked Prahlada to rule his father's kingdom. Ramakrishna had many illustrious householder disciples. Nag Mahashaya and Mahendranath Gupta wanted to renounce the world, but Ramakrishna asked them to continue to live in the world as an example for other householders. Likewise, Prahlada ruled the kingdom wisely and during his reign the gods and demons lived peacefully. But

during the reign of his son Virochana the gods gradually regained their independence; then, Virochana's son Bali drove away the gods from heaven, thus disturbing the cosmic balance.

One thing is common to both gods and demons: they seek enjoyment, though it is usually the demons who resort to unrighteous means to obtain it. One is surprised to find that even Indra, king of the gods, is found at times to employ unfair means to fulfil his desires and is consequently cursed for his behaviour. Yet, he is wise enough to take shelter in the Supreme Being whenever in trouble. This reminds us of Mathuranath Biswas, who at times resorted to unlawful means; yet Ramakrishna protected him because he had great devotion to him.

Vamana

Vamana is another of Bhagavan's incarnations, in this case as the dwarf son of Aditi, the mother of the gods. Aditi lived a life of intense self-control and penance before she gave birth to the divine child. The pious parents of Ramakrishna too led a life of devotion and self-control, truthfulness, and austerity. That is why Ramakrishna was born to them.

Vamana went to the demon king Bali and asked for the portion of land that he could cover with only three steps. In the meantime, the guru of the demons Shukracharya recognized Vamana as the Supreme Being and asked Bali not to grant that boon. Shukracharya was a calculating person who did not want his disciple Bali to keep his promise. Ramakrishna was against such calculating intelligence. According to him, such calculating persons cannot be spiritual. In the *Gospel of Ramakrishna* we find him once listening to the story of *Devi Choudhurani*. The author Bankim Chandra gave calculating advice, mixing righteousness and self-interest that Ramakrishna disliked. King Bali rejects even his guru's advice

and sticks to his promise, due to which he ultimately wins the favour of Vamana. He holds on to the two values of truth and charity, which were extolled by Ramakrishna as well.

Vivekananda goes to the extent of stating that one should always give, even if one is sometimes cheated. King Bali was not afraid of being cheated by the Divine Dwarf. He gave himself fully; he even gave his head—representing the ego—the last thing one can renounce. Ramakrishna used to say that all problems subside when the ego dies.

As the story goes, as soon as Bali vowed to give Vamana the land measuring three steps, the latter assumed a massive form and with two steps measured the earth and the heaven; the third step he graciously kept on Bali's head. Here we find Vamana assuming a massive form, which reminds us of the Upanishadic statement that Brahman is smaller than the smallest and greater than the greatest.

God incarnates in different forms, and sometimes his forms are so deceptive that one is bound to be misguided. King Bali was deluded by the dwarf's size and was indeed amused when he asked for some land measuring just three steps. In the present era God disguised himself as a poor, illiterate brahmana named Ramakrishna, and many people could not recognize him. There were also some persons—like Ashwini Kumar Dutta—who at first did not recognize Ramakrishna's divinity, but after seeing his immense spiritual dimension, which was initially concealed from them, wholeheartedly accepted his divinity.

Parashurama

With the Parashurama incarnation, Indian Puranas become realistic, in the sense that there are no more gods and demons fighting each other; instead, there are caste divisions with general tensions between the two upper castes—brahmana and kshatriya. Parashurama

was born with aggressive kshatriya characteristics in a brahmana family, and Vishwamitra was born with brahmana traits in a king's family.

Parashurama's life can be divided into two parts: first, he is a fierce warrior who destroys the wicked kshatriyas twenty-one times; second, he lives a retired and secluded life, though still proud of his valorous deeds. This pride is humbled by Rama, the next incarnation of Vishnu. Some consider Parashurama only a partial incarnation of God—*amshavatara*.

It is very difficult to find any similarity or draw parallels between the lives and personalities of Parashurama and Ramakrishna, except that both were brahmanas by birth. Ramakrishna was extremely mild, with no trace of violence, and was the very embodiment of humility. If, however, we consider the evil-minded kshatriyas as symbolic of evil tendencies, Ramakrishna was at war against them. But, while Parashurama killed the evil ones twenty-one times, Ramakrishna could destroy each one of his inner foes—greed, lust, and the like—with a single blow, as it were. As to pride, he had none of it; Ramakrishna was a perfect specimen of fully evolved brahmana-hood.

Rama

The next two incarnations of God have influenced Indian culture the most: Rama and Krishna. The stories of these two incarnations are too well known to be elaborated here. Vivekananda, in one of his hymns in praise of Ramakrishna, has clearly stated that he who was Rama and he who was Krishna is now born as Ramakrishna:

The One born as Rama of incomparable greatness in all the three worlds; who was the very life of Janaka's daughter; who, though himself beyond the world, lo, did not give up doing good to it; the current of whose love flowed ever unchecked down even to a Chandala; and whose body of supreme knowledge was enveloped by

devotion in the form of Sita; the One born as Krishna too, who sang the song (the Gita) sweet and tranquil, yet deep as the roar of a lion, suppressing the great cataclysmic tumult raised in the battlefield and destroying the innate and deep-seated darkness of ignorance—that ever-renowned Divine Personality is now born as Ramakrishna.¹²

About the special characteristics of Rama, Vivekananda said: ‘Coming down to later times, there have been great world-moving sages, great Incarnations ... and those that are worshipped most in India are Rama and Krishna. Rama, the ancient idol of the heroic ages, the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, the ideal father, and above all, the ideal king, this Rama has been presented before us by the great sage Valmiki.’¹³

According to Ramakrishna, Rama was a perfect *jnani*:

I realize that wherever I live I am always in the Ayodhya of Rama. This whole world is Rama’s Ayodhya. After receiving instructions from His teacher, Rama said that He would renounce the world. Dasharatha sent the sage Vashishtha to Rama to dissuade Him. Vashishtha found Him filled with intense renunciation. He said to Rama: ‘First of all, reason with me, Rama; then You may leave the world. May I ask You if this world is outside God? If that is so, then You may give it up.’ Rama found that it is God alone who has become the universe and all its living beings. Everything in the world appears real on account of God’s reality behind it. Thereupon Rama became silent.¹⁴

Ramakrishna used to give the example of Rama to encourage householders to live in the world without attachment.

If Rama befriended the tribal Nishadaraja Guha—the ferryman who took him across

the Ganga—created an alliance with the monkey king Sugriva, and ate the fruits offered to him by Shabari of low birth, Ramakrishna accepted many of the lower castes as well. He received his first alms from Dhani, who was from a blacksmith’s family, blessed the sweeper Rasik, and also accepted the servant boy Latu as his disciple.

Rama went to the forest and lived there under trying situations for fourteen long years, just to keep the word given to Kaikeyi by King Dasharatha, Rama’s father. Similarly, Ramakrishna considered the observance of truth as the special austerity for the present Kali Yuga. He was so perfectly established in truth that never did he deviate from it in his whole life.

Like Rama, Ramakrishna was also an ideal son, an ideal husband, and an ideal guru. For the sake of his old mother living at the Dakshineswar temple, he gave up the idea of shifting to Vrindavan and of living with Gangamayee, a highly evolved saint. As an ideal husband, Ramakrishna took special care of his wife, the Holy Mother Sarada Devi. He deposited some money out of his salary as priest in order to provide Sarada Devi with a future means of subsistence. He diligently trained her not only in secular matters but in spiritual as well. She used to say that Ramakrishna never hurt her even with a flower. That Ramakrishna was an ideal guru is well known. He would assess the temperament of each individual disciple and train him or her accordingly.

Ramakrishna’s family deity was Rama. His father Kshudiram had miraculously obtained a Shalagrama Shila, a stone emblem of Rama. The names of all the male members of his family contained the name of Rama. And during his period of spiritual practice, Ramakrishna worshipped and established relations with Rama in two devotional moods: *dasya* and *vatsalya*—as a servant and as a parent.

Krishna

Krishna's life and personality has two distinct aspects: one manifested at Vrindavan, the other at Mathura and Dwaraka—the *gopijanavallabha* and the *gitacharya* aspects respectively. Swami Ramakrishnananda has named the former aspect 'pastoral' and the latter 'kingmaker'. Vivekananda too has recognized and pointed out their relative significance.

About the first facet Vivekananda says, 'The highest thing we can get out of him is Gopijanavallabha, the Beloved of the Gopis of Vrindavan.'¹⁵ 'He is the simple Krishna, ever the same Krishna who played with the Gopis. Ah, that most marvellous passage of his life, the most difficult to understand ... that most marvellous expansion of love, allegorised and expressed in that beautiful play at Vrindavan, which none can understand but he who has become mad with love, drunk deep of the cup of love!' (3.257). 'That', Vivekananda says, 'is the very essence of the Krishna Incarnation' (3.259).

To the second aspect Vivekananda assigns a lower place: 'To come down to the lower stratum—Krishna, the preacher of the Gita' (3.260). 'He is the most wonderful Sannyasin, and the most wonderful householder in one; he had the most wonderful amount of Rajas, power, and was at the same time living in the midst of the most wonderful renunciation. Krishna can never be understood until you have studied the Gita, for he was the embodiment of his own teaching (3.256).

This dual expression of ideal man and God together is present in all incarnations, especially in Rama, Krishna, and Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna used to say that within him there were two beings: one the bhakta, the devotee, the other Bhagavan, God. He was an ideal human being whose life and character are to be deeply studied and emulated. At the same time, he was a

Krishna said to Arjuna: "You speak of Me as an Incarnation of God. Let Me show you something. Come with Me." Arjuna had followed Sri Krishna a short distance, when Sri Krishna asked him, "What do you see there?" Arjuna replied, "A big tree with black berries hanging in bunches." Krishna said, "Those are not black berries. Go nearer and look at them." Arjuna went nearer and saw that they were Krishnas hanging in bunches. "Do you see now", said Krishna, "how many Krishnas like Me have grown there?"

—*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 853

divine being who can be worshipped and adored. Vivekananda, therefore, considers him *nara-deva*, god and human in one.

Regarding the Gita Ramakrishna used to say that if we pronounce the word 'gita' repeatedly, it sounds 'tagi-tagi-tagi', that is *tyagi*, which means 'one who has renounced'. Thus, for him, the essence of the Gita is renunciation, in which he was fully established. In this respect Ramakrishna was an embodiment of the Gita, much as Krishna was. Ramakrishna is also considered to be the embodiment of the highest divine love as manifest in the gopis of Vrindavan. Besides, he had at different periods of his life not only the visions of Rama, Sita, and Krishna, but these divine beings also merged into him, indicating thereby that he was no other than them.

Krishna is the preacher of the Gita, the great scripture which is given the status of an Upanishad. The *Gospel of Ramakrishna* is a great scripture as well, a veritable Upanishad.

The comparative study of the personalities and teachings of Rama and Krishna with Ramakrishna's is too vast a subject to be covered in this article. Only a basic outline has been presented here.

Buddha

Although an opponent of the Vedic *karmakanda* and the founder of a new religion, Buddha has been accepted as one of the Hindu avatars. Born a prince, he renounced his kingdom, young wife, and son in search of Truth, which he attained through an extraordinary spiritual effort. He is the most human among the avatars, endowed with exemplary human qualities. He was intensely sensitive, and the mere sight of suffering in the form of disease, old age, and death awakened him to the unpleasant reality of the world to such an extent that he did not rest till he discovered a way out of this suffering; through intense yearning he realized the Truth.

While the starting point of Ramakrishna's spiritual striving was different—he wanted to see the Divine Mother—his yearning and intensity was as great as that of Buddha. If Buddha was ready to give up his body on the meditation seat to attain that rare supreme knowledge attainable only in aeons, Ramakrishna too could not brook a moment's separation from the Divine Mother, and even attempted to give up his body in search of her.

Among the various excellences of Buddha, Vivekananda highlighted a few. He admired Buddha's wisdom and considered him the sanest philosopher the world has seen. He also extolled Buddha as a great karma yogi who worked for work's sake without any other motive, and as a being full of compassion as well, ready to even lay down his own life to save a lamb. These excellent traits are equally found in Ramakrishna, who never indulged in hair-splitting arguments and went straight to the point. To Hari—one of his disciples, later known as Swami Turiyananda—who was studying Vedantic texts, Ramakrishna said that the final conclusion of all Vedantic teachings was that 'Brahman is real and the world unreal', and

to be a true Vedantin one needs only to put this teaching into practice instead of reading scores of books with intricate arguments.

Ramakrishna was also a great karma yogi who continued to labour for the good of others till the last day of his life. Buddha accepted the invitation of a low caste person, who offered him a dish that ultimately led to his death. Ramakrishna, on his death bed, did not send away anyone who came to him for counsel, even if it meant hastening the end. Vivekananda has, therefore, described Ramakrishna as *karmakalevaram-adbhuta-cheshtam* (8.174), one whose body was full of activity and whose divine exploits were wonderful. Both Buddha and Ramakrishna lived only for others.

In regard to their teachings there are some differences between them: whereas Buddha stressed the obvious truth of suffering, Ramakrishna asserted the not-so-obvious truth of the existence of God. Buddha said that suffering can be removed; Ramakrishna declared that God can be realized. Buddha taught the eight-fold noble path, while Ramakrishna accepted all paths as true provided they were followed with sincerity and yearning for the Divine. From the historic and spiritual point of view both Buddha and Ramakrishna have initiated powerful worldwide religious movements of monks, nuns, and lay devotees.

Kalki

The tenth avatara, yet to come, is Kalki. Ramakrishna said: 'God will incarnate Himself as Kalki at the end of the Kaliyuga. He will be born as the son of a brahmin. Suddenly and unexpectedly a sword and horse will come to him.'¹⁶ It is said that Kalki will destroy evil people and after that the Satya Yuga, Age of Truth, will appear once again.

In the context of the evolution of Hindu avatars, as described in the Puranas, we see a gradual

humanization that reaches a most serene, non-violent, and compassionate expression in Buddha, the ninth incarnation. The description of Kalki, the tenth, as a warrior avatara does not fit into this evolutionary pattern. And since Vivekananda said that the Satya Yuga has started with the advent of Ramakrishna, some believe that Ramakrishna himself is Kalki, and that the description of sword, horse, and the rest is merely allegorical.

Conclusion

Some scholars are of the opinion that the concept of ten Hindu avatars depicts the gradual evolution of species, beginning with the first creature having a brain, the fish. One of the important messages conveyed in this concept is that of the presence of God in all creatures, whatever be their state of evolution. Among God's human manifestations too there is a gradation. In Narasimha, the human is first evolving out of a lion, the best among beasts. Vamana, the next incarnation, is a human dwarf. The fully developed Parashurama follows, and he represents the aggressive primitive human who believed in brute force and the animal law of 'might is right'. Rama and Krishna are, in comparison, milder and more considerate; nevertheless, they wage wars and wield weapons to subdue miscreants. Buddha is an incarnation of compassion and love, though he did condemn the priestcraft of the brahmanas. In the Ramakrishna incarnation none was condemned, none left out, and the weapons used to win over the wicked tendencies of human beings were humility and love. As an extension of the Ramakrishna incarnation, his divine consort Sarada Devi manifested deep love, compassion, patience, and all the qualities that make an ideal woman, nun, and mother in one. Sarada Devi survived Ramakrishna by thirty-four years and demonstrated through her life what God incarnated as mother is like; she manifested the motherhood of God.

In the legends of most of the incarnations evil is represented either by a single demon or by a group of demons, who are destroyed by the incarnation. During Parashurama's time, the kshatriyas represented the evil side. Rama was a kshatriya and killed Ravana, the unrighteous one, though brahmana by birth. Interestingly, during the Krishna incarnation evil had become so pervasive that he had to plot the killing not only of the Kauravas and their whole army, but also of all the allies of the Pandavas and even of his own clan, the Yadavas. However, in the Ramakrishna incarnation, none is particularly condemned; all people are taken as manifestations of the Divine and are guided accordingly. What other evidence do we need to consider him *avatara varishtha*, the supreme incarnation?



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Kashmir Shaivism in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings

Swami Tadananda

IN 1894 SWAMI VIVEKANANDA WROTE to his disciple Alasinga: "The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras (scriptures). He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach. The books were theories, he was the realisation."¹ Thus, it is not surprising that when this searchlight is turned upon the non-dualistic Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir, also known as Trika philosophy, it illumines many remarkable similarities. Sri Ramakrishna had said that his spiritual experiences had gone beyond the Vedas and the Vedanta. Interestingly, we find it easier to understand some of his profound teachings in the light of the Trika philosophy. This article is an attempt to explore some of the salient principles of the Trika philosophy in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and vice-versa.

The Ultimate Reality

According to the Trika philosophy, the ultimate Reality is not only universal Consciousness but also supreme spiritual Power. It is *prakāśa-vimarśamaya*. *Prakāśa* is *cit* or *parā-saṁvit*, the light of Consciousness without which nothing can appear, the universal non-relational Con-

sciousness in which there is no distinction between subject and object, I and This. It is Shiva. The supreme Self is ever surveying itself or has a non-relational, immediate awareness of *aham*, I-consciousness. *Cit* conscious of itself as *cidrūpiṇī śakti*, Consciousness as Power, is *vimarśa*. This I-consciousness of the ultimate Reality is the mirror in which Shiva realizes his own power, grandeur, and beauty. *Vimarśa śakti* has been variously named *parā-śakti*, *aiśvarya*, *spanda*, *hr̥daya*, *parā-vak*, *svātantrya*, *citi*, and so on.

Sri Ramakrishna also experienced this spiritual truth and taught that 'He who is Brahman is also Shakti. When thought of as inactive, He is called Brahman, and when thought of as the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, He is called the Primordial Energy, Kali.'² The *Vijñānabhairava* expresses the same truth in the following verse:

*Śakti-śaktimator-yadvad
abhedat sarvadā sthitaḥ;
Ata-tad-dharma-dharmitvāt
parā-śaktiḥ parātmanah.*

Since there is always non-difference between Shakti and the possessor of Shakti (*śaktimat*), Shakti, being endowed with His (*śaktimat*'s) attributes, becomes the bearer of the same attributes. Therefore, being non-different from *para* (the highest, Bhairava), She is known as *parā* (the highest, Bhairavi).³

Furthermore, while explaining the identity of Brahman and Shakti, Sri Ramakrishna uses the analogy of fire and its power to burn. He says, 'Brahman and Shakti are identical, like fire and its

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power to burn. When we talk of fire we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire's power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one you must accept the other.'⁴ The *Vijnana-bhairava* expresses this in the following verses:

*Na vahner-dāhikā śaktiḥ
vyatirikṭā vibhāvya;
Kevalam jñāna-sattāyām
prārambhōyam praveśane.*

The burning power of fire is not accepted as separate from fire even after full consideration (even so the *parā-śakti* is not accepted separate from *parama-śiva*, Bhairava). Only it is described in a distinct way as a preliminary step for the listener (as an aid) towards entry into its knowledge.⁵

Shakti as the World-process

Svātantrya, unimpeded sovereignty, is the characteristic par excellence of Shakti. Sri Ramakrishna reveals that 'The Divine Mother is always playful and sportive. This universe is Her play. She is self-willed and must always have Her own way. She is full of bliss.'⁶ She expresses herself as *icchā*, will, which immediately translates into *jñana*, knowledge, and *kriyā*, action. She is the *kartṛtva-śakti*, Shiva's power of doer-ship responsible for manifestation, maintenance, and absorption of the universe. Thus, the all-inclusive supreme Reality is both *viśvottīrṇa*, transcendental, and *viśvamaya*, immanent. This idea is expressed in the opening verses of the *Pratyabhijnahridaya*:

Citiḥ svatantrā viśva-siddhi-betuḥ.

The absolute *citi* of its own free will is the cause of the *siddhi*, effectuation, of the universe.⁷

Svecchayā sva-bhittau viśvam-unmīlayati.

By the power of her own will (alone), she (*citi*) unfolds the universe upon her own screen (i.e. in herself as the basis of the universe) (51).

Sri Ramakrishna vividly expresses his experi-

ence of the divine immanence of Shakti: 'The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kali temple that it was She who had become everything. She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The Image was Consciousness, the altar was Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the door-sill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness—all was Consciousness.'⁸ 'I see that God alone has become everything. Men and animals are only frameworks covered with skin, and it is He who is moving through their heads and limbs. I see that it is God Himself who has become the block, the executioner, and the victim for the sacrifice' (70). 'When I see a man, I see that it is God Himself who walks on earth, as it were, rocking to and fro, like a pillow floating on the waves. The pillow moves with the waves. It bobs up and down' (396). 'Mother, what people call "man" is only a pillow-case, nothing but a pillow-case. Consciousness is Thine alone' (225).

It is worth noting here that non-duality is spoken of not only on the transcendental plane but on the immanent Shakti aspects of Reality as well. While expounding the Advaita philosophy in his lecture 'One Existence Appearing as Many', Swami Vivekananda elaborates this thought:

In the whole of this universe there is but One Existence; and that One Existence when seen through the senses is called the world, the world of matter. When It is seen through the mind, It is called the world of thoughts and ideas; and when It is seen as it is, then It is the One Infinite Being. You must bear this in mind; it is not that there is a soul in man, although I had to take that for granted in order to explain it at first, but that there is only One Existence, and that one the Atman, the Self; and when this is perceived through the senses, through sense-imageries, It is called the body. When It is perceived through thought, It is called the mind. When It is perceived in Its own nature, It is the Atman, the One Only Existence. So it is

not that there are three things in one, the body and the mind and the Self, although that was a convenient way of putting it in the course of explanation; but all is that Atman, and that one Being is sometimes called the body, sometimes the mind, and sometimes the Self, according to different vision. ... Dualism and non-dualism are very good philosophic terms, but in perfect perception we never perceive the real and the false at the same time. We are all born monists, we cannot help it.⁹

Shakti: The Cause of Bondage and Liberation

The Shaiva Agamas propound that it is Shakti alone who is the cause of both bondage and liberation of jivas. The *Spanda Karika* says:

*Seyam kriyātmikā śaktiḥ
śivasya paśu-vartinī;
Bandhayitrī svamārgasthā
jñātā siddhyupapādikā.*

That aforementioned [Shakti] operative power of Shiva existing in the bound soul is a source of bondage; the same when realized as residing in him as the way of approach to one's essential reality brings about success (that is, the achievement of liberation).¹⁰

The same idea is expressed in the *Vijnana bhairava*:

*Śakty-avasthā-praviṣṭasya
nirvibhāgena bhāvanā;
Tadāsau śiva-rūpī syāt śaivī
mukham-ihocyate.*

When in one who enters the state of Shakti (that is, is identified with Shakti) there ensues the feeling of non-distinction (between Shakti and Shiva), then he acquires the state of Shiva, for in the Agamas, She (Shakti) is declared as the door of entrance (into Shiva) (literally, Shakti is Shiva's face).¹¹

Just as one recognizes a person by his face,

even so one recognizes Shiva by his Shakti, who is like his face.

*Yathālokena dīpasya
kīraṇair-bhāskarasya ca;
Jñāyate dig-vibhāgādi
tadvac-chaktyā śivaḥ priye.*

Just as by means of the light of a lamp, and the rays of the sun, portions of space, etc. are known, even so, O dear one, by means of Shakti is Shiva (who is one's own essential Self) cognized (recognized) (ibid.).

Jaideva Singh notes that there are three points suggested by this simile: (i) just as the flame of the lamp is not different from its light, just as the rays of the sun are not different from the sun, even so Shakti is not different from Shiva; (ii) just as through a lamp or the sun, the objects of the world are perceived, even so through Shakti the universe is known; (iii) just as to perceive the light of a lamp another lamp is not required, or to perceive the sun another sun is not required—they are known by their own light—even so Shiva is known by his Shakti, who is not different from him.

Under the spell of the binding power of Shakti, the universal I-consciousness, *purnāhamtā*, of Shiva is reduced to the limited I-consciousness experienced by jivas. This limited I-consciousness is itself an aspect of Shakti. Thus, all are within the jurisdiction of Shakti. Sri Ramakrishna reveals the source of our limited I-consciousness as follows: 'As long as a man must see the Sun in the water of his "I-consciousness" and has no other means of seeing It, as long as he has no means of seeing the real Sun except through Its reflection, so long is the reflected sun alone one hundred per cent real to him. As long as the "I" is real, so long is the reflected sun real—one hundred per cent real. That reflected sun is nothing but the Primal Energy.'¹²

He then explains how this I-consciousness,

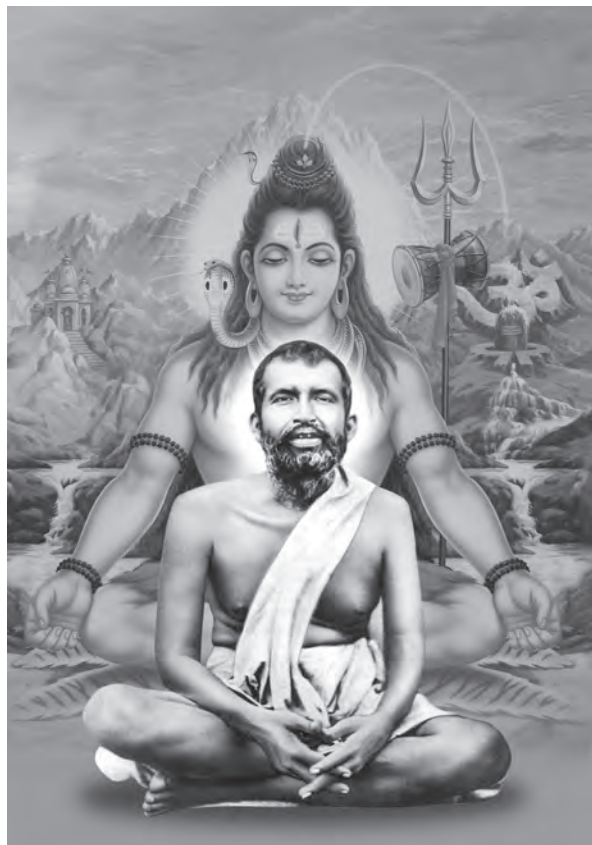
which is the experience of Shakti as the ‘face of Shiva’ can be approached for the vision of Shiva. He says: ‘But if you seek Brahmajnana, the Knowledge of the attributeless Brahman, then proceed to the real Sun through Its reflection. Pray to Brahman with attributes, who listens to your prayers, and He Himself will give you full Knowledge of Brahman; for that which is Brahman with attributes is verily Brahman without attributes, that which is Brahman is verily Shakti’ (ibid.).

One may form some conceptual understanding of higher spiritual truths with the help of reasoning, but an actual experience of these is possible only when the Divine Mother opens the door and lets one in. Sri Ramakrishna clearly explains:

The jnanis, who adhere to the non-dualistic philosophy of Vedanta, say that the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, the universe itself and all its living beings, are the manifestations of Shakti, the Divine Power. If you reason it out, you will realize that all these are as illusory as a dream. Brahman alone is the Reality, and all else is unreal. Even this very Shakti is unsubstantial, like a dream. But though you reason all your life, unless you are established in samadhi, you cannot go beyond the jurisdiction of Shakti. Even when you say, ‘I am meditating,’ or ‘I am contemplating,’ still you are moving in the realm of Shakti, within Its power (134).

One must propitiate the Divine Mother, the Primal Energy, in order to obtain God’s grace. God Himself is Mahamaya, who deludes the world with Her illusion and conjures up the magic of creation, preservation, and destruction. She has spread this veil of ignorance before our eyes. We can go into the inner chamber only when She lets us pass through the door. Living outside, we see only outer objects, but not that Eternal Being, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute (116).

A man attains Brahmajnana only when it is given to him by the Adyashakti, the Divine Mother. Then alone does he see the whole thing



as magic; otherwise not. As long as the slightest trace of ego remains, one lives within the jurisdiction of the Adyashakti. One is under Her sway. One cannot go beyond Her (460).

The spiritual disciplines prescribed in the Shaiva Agamas are in general akin to the paths of knowledge, jnana yoga, and meditation, dhyana yoga. Shakti is presented very much as an impersonal and distant entity. The aspirant has to approach her by contemplating on her as the source of the I-consciousness, by mindfulness of her five-fold activities—projection, maintenance, absorption, concealment, and revelation. However, Sri Ramakrishna approaches the same Shakti in a more personal way as the all-powerful and sportive Divine Mother, who responds to our earnest prayers and upon whom the child can even force its demands. She is the all-compassionate Mother who puts aside her frightful form and readily

takes the child in her lap. Verily she is our real and only mother, our refuge and protector, and the supreme mistress of the universe.

The Ultimate Goal of Vijnāna or Śiva-vyāpti

The ultimate goal of the Shaiva Agamas is not only Self-realization but acquisition of *śivatva-yojanā*, the status of Shiva. Or, in the language of the Shaiva Agamas, the ultimate goal is not merely *ātma-vyāpti* but *śiva-vyāpti*. *Ātma-vyāpti* in the Shaiva tradition means the realization of the Self, which is characterized by limited knowledge, jnana, and activity, *kriyā*. This is a lower ideal. In *śiva-vyāpti* there is the union and fusion of Shiva and Shakti, *śiva-śakti-sāmarasya*, characterized by universal and all-pervasive knowledge and activity. This *śiva-vyāpti* is the status of *parama-śiva*, who is simultaneously both transcendent to and immanent in the universe.

Sri Ramakrishna speaks of this same ideal in terms of jnana and *vijñāna*. He categorically says: 'A man should reach the Nitya, the Absolute, by following the trail of the Lila, the Relative. It is like reaching the roof by the stairs. After realizing the Absolute, he should climb down to the Relative and live on that plane in the company of devotees, charging his mind with the love of God. This is my final and most mature opinion' (257).

Speaking out of his personal experience, he illumines this most profound subject as follows:

The jnani gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, 'Not this, not this'. Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the vijnani, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman, through the elim-

inating process of 'Not this, not this', is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The vijnani sees that the Reality which is nirguna, without attributes, is also saguna, with attributes (103-4).

What is vijnana? It is to know God in a special way. The awareness and conviction that fire exists in wood is jnana, knowledge. But to cook rice on that fire, eat the rice, and get nourishment from it is vijnana. To know by one's inner experience that God exists is jnana. But to talk to Him, to enjoy Him as Child, as Friend, as Master, as Beloved, is vijnana. The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is vijnana (288).

Pure Mind, Pure Intellect, Pure Self

Sri Ramakrishna frequently expresses the view that 'Pure Mind, Pure Intelligence, Pure Atman, are one and the same thing' (524). This is impossible to understand from the viewpoint of Sankhya philosophy, according to which prior to liberation the *citta*, mind-stuff, must undergo *pratiprasava*, mergence or dissolution, into Prakriti, the causal matrix. According to Vedanta, the Self is beyond mind and speech.

However, the *Pratyabhijnahridaya* states that *citi*, universal consciousness, verily becomes *citta* through *avaroha* or *nimeśa*, the process of involution:

*Citireva cetana-padād-avarūdhā
cetya-saṃkocinī cittam.*

Citi itself descending from the state of *cetana* (knower) becomes *citta* (individual consciousness), inasmuch as it becomes contracted in conformity with the objects of consciousness.¹³

In the process of involution, due to the limitation of Shakti, the universal will-power, omniscience, and omnipotence of Shiva are reduced to the limited will-power, knowledge, and activity of a jiva.

The *Pratyabhijnahridaya* also describes *adhyāroha* or *unmeśa*, the reverse process of evolution, whereby the same *citta* regains its real nature by giving up its limitations:


*Tat-parijñāne cittam-eva antarmukhī-bhāven
cetana-padādhyārohāt citiḥ.*

On the realization (of the five-fold act of the Self), *citta* (the individual consciousness) by inward movement becomes *citi* (universal consciousness) by rising to the status of *cetana* (the knowing subject) (85).

The introverted and purified mind aspiring to commune with the supreme I-consciousness of Shiva is itself the mantra, as expressed by the following sutra of the *Shiva Sutra: Cittam mantrah*. The etymological interpretation of the term 'mantra' points to its characteristic of (i) *manana*, pondering with intense awareness over the highest light of I-consciousness; and (ii) *trāṇa*, protection, by terminating the trans-migratory existence. Kshemraja, in his commentary on this sutra explains: 'The mind of the devotee intent on intensive awareness of the deity inherent in the *mantra* acquires identity with that deity and thus becomes that *mantra* itself. It is this mind which is mantra, not a mere conglomeration of various letters.'¹⁴

In Sri Ramakrishna's words: 'Maya is nothing but the egotism of the embodied soul. This egotism has covered everything like a veil. ... The sun cannot be seen on account of a thin patch of cloud; when that disappears one sees the sun' (168–9). 'The mind must withdraw totally from all objects of form, taste, smell, touch, and sound. Only thus does it become pure. The Pure Mind is the same as the Pure Atman. ... When it [the mind] becomes pure, one has another experience. One realizes: "God alone is the Doer, and I am His instrument"' (350). 'Then he at once becomes a jivanmukta. ... The jiva is nothing but

the embodiment of Satchidananda. But since maya, or ego, has created various upadhis, he has forgotten his real Self' (169). 'A man freed from bondage is Shiva; entangled in bondage, he is jiva' (703).

This article is at best an introductory exploration of a few principles of the Trika philosophy in the light of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and experiences. This subject is highly relevant to sadhana; consequently, an in-depth comparative study of the subjects introduced herein is a worthwhile exercise for earnest aspirants. Other topics such as *bhāvamukha*, *khecarī samatā*, *mantra-śakti*, and *guru-śakti* could not be taken up in this brief article, as they require a more elaborate treatment of the fundamental principles of the Trika philosophy. 

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Re-visioning Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

IN HIS INTERESTING STUDY of science and religion, Thomas Dixon observes that these are ‘two cultural enterprises which encounter each other in the mind of the individual and in the political domain’. The encounter between the two is a continuing one, as is manifest in various fields of life and in such denominations as creationists and evolutionists, theists and atheists, orthodox religionists and radicals who wish to displace religion and install science in its place. The decline of values, the primacy of scientific methodology, and the increasing impact of the global economic crises led to ‘academic work by scientists and theologians seeking to develop a harmonious interdisciplinary dialogue’ supported by both religious groups and projects ‘committed to supporting research that harmonizes science with religion’—such as the Templeton Foundation. The overall aim is to promote ‘an altruistic and compassionate life’.¹

What has Sri Ramakrishna to do with science as it exists today? Everything, one would like to say. The basic insight is available in his own remarks about science: ‘A man cannot comprehend spiritual things with his ordinary intelligence.’ Moreover: ‘One cannot know the truth about God through science. Science gives us information only about things perceived by the senses.’² Is human consciousness satisfied by such knowledge of limited thresholds? As Dixon puts it: ‘When you look up at the night sky, you may

not be thinking about astronomy and cosmology at all. You may instead be gripped by a sense of the power of the nature, the beauty and the grandeur of the heavens, the vastness of space and time, and your own smallness and insignificance.’ Exploring another facet of this experience, Dixon adds: ‘This might even be a religious experience for you, reinforcing your feeling of awe at the power of God and the immensity and complexity of his creation.’³

Science and its various theories are now ‘conflict narratives’. But all of them are impelled by the desire to extend the boundaries of knowledge and wisdom. The real threat does not lie in the fundamentals of science. It lies in elevating what are hypotheses into fundamentalist insights, inflexible and irrevocable. Therefore, is there a spiritual tradition that tackles the conflict narratives and, in spite of being ancient, has amazing continuity—more than any other religious tradition? I suggest it is tantra.

The Background of Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

Sri Ramakrishna tantra is not just a recurrent derivative of an ancient tradition of great antiquity. His sadhana in this area is a renascent phenomenon that, while retaining the core, removes the aberrations to which this system is particularly prone. About its antiquity Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple and the most authentic biographer of the Great Master, says: ‘That men of the very highest type have been the advocates of *Tantra* worship from very ancient times and that almost all the rituals of worship observed at present in

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India, are performed according to the forms prescribed in the *Tantras*, sufficiently justify us in taking up the subject for special consideration.⁴

Besides its antiquity, tantra evolved over the years 'containing an amalgam of religion, philosophy, esoteric and occult rites, astronomy, astrology, medicine and prognostications.'⁵ Sir John Woodroffe, however, characterises it as 'largely free of Vaidik exclusiveness whether based on caste, sex or otherwise. As the Gautamiya-Tantra says, "the Tantra is for all men, of whatever caste, and for all women." (Sarva-varnadhikarashcha narinam yogya eva ca).'⁶

One of the root meanings of tantra is 'spreading', along with 'protecting'. Applied to the Great Master, his tantra sadhana spreads its continuing relevance across boundaries and, more importantly, protects as well as restores its pristine purity as a singularly psychological mode of sadhana. Thus, he demonstrates that for our age tantra is a valid sadhana, though akin to a razor's edge. Arcane rituals, intrinsically authentic, are dispensable, and privileging of caste, gender, and the like is negated—devotees and sadhakas are all of one caste, Sri Ramakrishna affirms.

One of the 'inter-texts' in the Bengali edition of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is from the *Mahanirvana Tantra*: 'You are the subtle and You are the gross; You, O Mother, are manifest as well as unmanifest. You are both with form and formless, who has the capacity to know You?'⁷ The subtle-gross interplay is embodied in Sri Ramakrishna's *lila-kshetra*, Dakshineswar, and the presiding deity, Bhavatarini. The site of Dakshineswar has a tantric ambience: there was 'an abandoned Muslim graveyard where a Muslim holy man had been buried. The plot was in the shape of a tortoise shell, high in the centre and low around the edge, which the Tantras say is auspicious for a place of Shakti worship.'⁸

It seems incredibly congruent that the re-

deemer and restorer of tantra for the present age should have found for his sadhana a burial ground sanctified by a Muslim holy man—a tomb in general is sometimes held to be 'a maternal and feminine symbol of a generic kind'⁹—and in the shape of a tortoise shell as well. The ground is symbolic of Smashana Kali, the destructive, but the temple on it is of Bhavatarini, the protective. As one sage put it, birthday candles have their twin in funeral flames—just as the birth of modern technological communications is an offshoot of the world wars!

Almost all aspects of Kali, the Mother, are evoked by the Great Master in songs that he himself sang or made devotees sing. They are mostly verbal pictures of the deity's various facets, expressive of corresponding emotions. For instance, death is the motif in this song sung by the Master:

To arms! To arms, O man! Death
storms your house in battle array!
Bearing the quiver of knowledge,
mount the chariot of devotion;
Bend the bow of Your tongue
with the bow-string of love,
And aim at him the shaft of
Mother Kali's holy name.
Here is a ruse for the fray:
You need no chariot or charioteer;
Fight your foe from the Ganges' bank,
and he is easily slain.¹⁰

The burial ground of Dakshineswar thus radiates the motif of death-in-life and life-in-death. Life would mean the reality of the body and all that it embodies and involves. The temple itself is an extension of the human body in every sense of the word.

Sri Ramakrishna's affirmation of tantra is fraught with far-ranging implications. He declares: 'Follow your own intuition. I hope there is no more doubt in your mind. Is there any? The

path of the Vedas is not meant for the Kaliyuga. The path of Tantra is efficacious' (311). It is necessary to link this with another pointer that the Great Master gives: Bhakti yoga is the appropriate path for this age. Thus, there is a trinity of modes: tantra, bhakti, and yoga. All the three coexist under the arch of *prema*, supreme love.

One can, therefore, suggest that Sri Ramakrishna's uniqueness is in achieving not so much *samanvaya*, integration, as *samarasya*, a balancing of the autonomous natures of every mode; autonomies that exists not as separate isolated entities—which, of course, they can—but as implicit or explicit interplay with other aspects. In other words, there are patterns of limited threshold without that limitation overreaching itself. Tantra typifies this *samarasya*.

Interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

Before proceeding further we have to deal with the ambience of hermeneutics that is used for interpreting tantra in general and Sri Ramakrishna in particular. The usual interpretations of academics are marked by the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. And, in its turn, this is built on the 'alleged' irrevocability and universality of Western frames, logical and psychological. They range from questioning the texts to challenging the authenticity of translations and even the accounts of those experiences recorded with scrupulous adherence to 'facts'. Thus, blatantly and brazenly insensitive readings of Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana are advanced by, mostly, academics. They read into the texts their own psychic compulsions inherited from the past and present postmodernists.

These warped observations are especially evident in responses to what may be called the 'dialectics of desire', crystallized by Sri Ramakrishna in the phrase 'woman and gold'. This expression is made out to be sexist and gender discriminatory.

Since the feminine principle is central to tantra, it is necessary to clear this wild, lush ground of 'woman and gold' choked with the weeds of weird interpretations. Was Sri Ramakrishna a hater of woman as most inimical to one's sadhana? Was he invariably and incessantly declaring 'woman' as the epitome of carnal desire alone? And, therefore, was he wary of woman as an 'enchantress'?

These questions must be faced squarely, since the recurrence of the 'woman and gold' motif in the *Gospel* has, perhaps, led to such misperceptions. One has to look at women devotees of the Master to arrive at the right perspective. Yogin-Ma—who underwent formal tantric initiation and has been described by Sister Devamata as 'one of the noblest of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples'¹¹—says: 'When strangers, casually reading the life of Sri Ramakrishna, jump to the conclusion that he did not like women, we simply laugh' (165). This is especially relevant because in a crucial emotional crisis the Great Master consoled her 'recounting the marvellous spiritual experiences he had had during his days of Tantric sadhana' (161). Moreover, she had read tantric scriptures and one of her husband's ancestors had compiled a well-known tantric text called *Pranatoshini Tantra*.

We also know that during his days in Kamarpukur Sri Ramakrishna was unselfconsciously free with women known of the village.¹² They, in turn, used to confide in him even matters strictly within their own domain. Further, in true tantric indifference to caste, gender, and the like he took his first *bhiksha*, alms, after his *upanayana*, sacred-thread ceremony, from Dhani, the low-caste woman who assisted at the time of his birth—though it is also true that, in certain contexts, Sri Ramakrishna was very strict regarding social conventions. Above all, his vision of the Divine Mother in a prostitute carries enormous significance with regard to the con-

temporary empowerment of women victims of social aberrations. Such women embody what Nancy Qualis-Corbett in a related study calls 'wisdom of the heart'. She says: 'Women, who are conscious of their true feminine being, are attentive to the wisdom of the heart; they do not allow this to be contaminated by collective norms and ideals. This wisdom (in men as well as in women) resides in the body and is related to the principle of Eros. Through it, women come to realize their true instinctive nature as it unites with the spirit, the male stranger, in the ritual of the sacred marriage.'¹³ Indeed, the different parts of the body are related to 'time' as embodied in the vital breath, *prana*.

Considering the body as sacred is an important aspect of tantra. What Sri Ramakrishna called the *bhagavati tanu*, love body,¹⁴ is a complex structure in the system of tantric symbology—symbology that shields profound truths from profane eyes. Thus, the truth realized within is the same truth that pervades and controls the whole universe.

This is an esoteric dimension that may appear somewhat poetic. But then, Kali herself exemplifies the natural element of time: a primal one, which creates, sustains, and dissolves. The creative nucleus contains death in life. It is, however, both playful and fearful, loving as also cruel. This could be seen as theology; yes, it could be. But then we have the concrete enactment of this tantric principle in the Great Master's worship of his consort Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother herself. Invoking the innate divine feminine to inundate the body of the Holy Mother, the Master prays: 'O

Divine Mother Tripura-sundari! O Eternal Virgin, possessor of all power! Please open the gate of all perfection. Purify her body and mind, and manifest Yourself through her for the welfare of all.'¹⁵

Swami Saradananda says: 'The Master's sadhana culminated in the worship of the Divine Mother *in the body of a woman* who was an embodiment of spiritual wisdom. Both the divine and human aspects had achieved ultimate perfection'¹⁶ in his divine consort. This event is instinct with several features relevant to what is today called 'women's empowerment'. It offers checks and balances to the continuing exploitation of women as 'brand ambassadors' of aggressively



advertised products reflecting the sensate culture of consumerism. The trend is nearly unstoppable, but then the Divine Mother has her own ways of checking excesses.

The larger contemporary relevance of this essentially tantric union of ‘polarities and dualities’ is being recognized, slowly but surely, by scientists. The celebrated biologist Rupert Sheldrake points out:

Some radical feminists and some male chauvinists may like the idea of the cosmic primacy of their own gender, but the metaphors of motherhood and fatherhood inevitably work against a one-sided view. When some people claim that everything comes from the Mother and others claim that everything comes from the Father, there is another obvious possibility: everything comes from both. If the earth is the realm of the Mother, the heavens are the realm of the Father and all life depends on their relationship. Or, if the feminine principle is the cosmic flux of power and energy, the masculine is the source of form and order, like Shakti and Shiva in Indian Tantrism.¹⁷

Dynamics of Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

In the light of all this, it is possible to think of Sri Ramakrishna tantra as rooted in a radical reversal of the traditions that were extant at the time of his advent. And it has continuing immediacy and relevance now amidst the excesses of a sensate culture that has consumerism, amorality, and materialism as its planks. In other words, one can think of ‘desire’ as central to tantra, and tantra as the technology of taming desire, whatever be its outlets, with a balanced life of desire checked by detachment. Desire is energy canalized through avenues correlated to enjoyment. But the great risk in handling energy and power is the temptation to develop them to the level of *siddhis*, psychic powers.

I would like to cite something very relevant to the entire field of desire as potential power and energy. In a fascinating interview Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out: ‘Education as such, if it educates, is an un-coercive rearrangement of desires.’ Elaborating on this, she says: ‘Education can be used for any purpose: you can also rearrange *desires for profound corruption*, so I do not, I cannot, assume at all that this kind of education is necessarily emancipatory.’¹⁸

This can be, I feel, extended to a tradition, though religious, like tantra. It is full of traps, trips, and twists. It is notorious these days for the incredible corruption of consciousness through reckless indulgence in the name of satisfying the senses, which, it is argued, are gifted by nature for enjoyment. Sri Ramakrishna rearranges some of the compulsive urges and ambitions that propel tantric practice. This is education not of the body alone but also of the instincts that it brings into play. One could call it a somewhat coercive rearrangement of the two primal desires: the economic and erotic. Coercive in the sense that it will eventually tame these through two overarching orientations: ethics and emancipation. *Tantra is emancipating education of desire.*

It sounds abstract, but behind the abstraction are real and concrete snares. Take the primary impulse of power in whatever form it manifests itself—and it has protean forms. Tantra sadhana dangles the sword of supernatural powers almost as a matter of course; any number of books—not just in English but in Indian languages as well—contain mystic formulae to achieve desired ends: ‘Repeat this mantra for fifteen days and you will get the power of attracting all!’ Sri Ramakrishna says: ‘Attainment of supernatural powers and so on—these are desires. Krishna once said to Arjuna: “Friend, you cannot realize God if you acquire even one of the eight supernatural powers. They will only add a little to

your power.”¹⁹ Explaining the reason, Sri Ramakrishna says that tantric powers do not bear fruit ‘because people cannot practise them with absolute correctness and devotion’ (ibid.).

The Great Master’s antidote to the desire for acquiring *siddhis* is expressed in one of the songs he used to sing: ‘Dive deep, O mind, dive deep in the ocean of God’s Beauty’ (153). One can take this advice as a meditative process having aspects that reflect the energies behind various *siddhis*. Thus, *anima*, minuteness, is the power of assimilating the entire manifestation to *cit*, divine Consciousness, which is our essential Self. *Laghima*, lightness, is transcending all diversity. *Mahima*, largeness, is the all-pervasiveness of the Self. *Prapti*, acquisition, is abidance in one’s Self; and *prakamya*, freedom of will, the power of enjoying the Divine Play. *Vashitva*, control, is the power of unitive consciousness. *Ishitva*, rulership, is abiding in uninterrupted divine Consciousness. Finally, *yatramavasyitva*, resolute will, is the *iccha-shakti*, will, that Shiva embodies.²⁰

These interpretations constitute a retrieval of core practices by reversal of the accepted but abused tantric forms. No wonder, Sri Ramakrishna asserts: mind is all. Internal mastery of mental energies through the appropriate practice of tantra makes the greatest power—love of God—manifest itself. The various aspects cited above constitute consciousness honed to perfection, an uninterrupted awareness that, if it does acquire *siddhis*, has no use for them. The continuous state of samadhi Sri Ramakrishna experienced is the apex of natural tantric yoga. For instance, by simply hearing the sound of the first letter of a mantra or at the mere sight of a flying bird, his mind would dive deep into the spiritual realm.

Let me cite now a few balanced responses from recent Western studies. Julius Evola, in his study of tantra, makes a broad distinction between ‘liberation’ and ‘liberty’, and says: ‘India

was to be credited for the ideal of *liberation* and the West was to be credited for the ideal of *liberty*.’ Explaining the implications, he observes: ‘On the one hand, there is the impulse to escape from the human condition in order to become reintegrated in an absolute from which we separated ourselves only to end up in a world of illusion (*maya*). On the other hand, there is the impulse to feel free in a world that is no longer denied, but that is rather considered as a field for action and for experiencing of all the possibilities inherent in the human condition.’²¹

Evola advances the premise that this differentiation is non-existent and, therefore, tantra is basically Western: ‘The differentiation between liberation and liberty no longer subsists, since, as a general rule, Tantrism, in its spirit—leaving out of consideration the framework of local traditions—should be considered distinctly Western. It is more conspicuously Western than Christian soteriology, which proclaims an ideal of salvation from a world that is looked upon as a “vale of tears” and contemplates the destiny of a human nature that has been infected with sin and that stands in need of redemption’ (ibid.).

Sri Ramakrishna declared tantras as proper for the Kali age. The Great Master considered the world as ‘a mansion of mirth’, *majara kuti*, but with the proviso that the aim regulate enjoyment within limits. In this sense, the hard core notion of Advaita—the world is an illusion—is softened and supplemented. An exemplary incident is that of Totapuri, the Great Master’s Advaita teacher, who developed such an intolerable abdominal colic that he went to the extent of trying to drown himself in the Ganga! The tantric systems see temptation itself as instinct with tremendous potential. In clear terms the Master tells us: ‘What the Vedas and the Puranas ask people to shun as impure is extolled by the Tantra as good.’²² Solange Lemaitre says:

In April last year (1981) I had gone to the Vedanta Centre in Kansas City to deliver a lecture. A young woman had written to the St Louis Vedanta Centre after reading about Sri Ramakrishna. I had asked her to meet me in Kansas. She was the daughter of a farmer and was well-read. She worked in a farmyard in far-off Kansas. The Midwest is called the 'bread basket' of America. This woman came to meet me driving three to four miles. When I was talking to her, tears started falling from her eyes. She said that while she was asleep in a small room in the farmyard, Sri Ramakrishna appeared to her and gave her a mantra. She told me the mantra. I was astonished and thought that Sri Ramakrishna's grace knows no bounds. It was as if Sri Ramakrishna was wandering all over the vast region of America's Midwest and looking for people who had longing for God!

—Swami Chetanananda,
Sri Ramakrishner Sannidhye, 257

'Vedanta proposes ... an austere and arduous method that can be pursued only by those exceptionally endowed with intelligence and will power.' In comparison, 'Tantrism is inclined to a greater indulgence and takes human weakness into consideration. It combines philosophy and religious ritual, meditation and ceremonial, renunciation and the joy of living.' It does not advocate 'abrupt renunciation of the outer world, for that world with all its manifestations is only the "game" (*lila*) of Siva and his *sakti*, Kali, of the Absolute and its *impenetrable* Power.'²³

Contextualizing Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

The implicit strategy is described by Sri Ramakrishna himself when he talks about the Bauls:

The Bauls designate the state of perfection as

the 'sahaja', the 'natural' state. There are two signs of this state. First, a perfect man will not 'smell of Krishna'. Second, he is like the bee that lights on the lotus but does not sip the honey. The first means that he keeps all his spiritual feelings within himself. He doesn't show outwardly any sign of spirituality. He doesn't even utter the name of Hari. The second means that he is not attached to woman. He has completely mastered his senses.²⁴

This 'coded' language is one of the aspects that require utmost caution, especially while interpreting some of Sri Ramakrishna's own statements. Minds mired in 'woman and gold' will find related motifs and themes in anything and everything. The context and the text exist with the Bengali nuances of meaning and suggestion. Even scholars who learn Bengali may not have the required inwardness with those nuances, inevitably jumping to so-called 'secrets'. And in tantra the instinct that few can resist is to equate the secret with the sordid. 'If one eats radish, one belches radish,' says the Great Master. But then, one sees only what one likes to see.

For instance, the way the exotic fascinates is evident in the poetry of Shelley. In his interesting study of the Bhagavadgita and the romantic poets, K G Srivastava suggests that 'Shelley appears to have been, to use a Sanskrit word, a *shākta*, a devotee of *Shakti* or primordial female Energy of the Universe whom the poet loved to call the "Great Mother". He also seems to have practised some kind of what Indians called *Tantra sadhana*.' The professor quotes the following lines, among others, from Shelley's poem *Alastor*, 'I have made my bed / In charnels and coffins, where black death / Keeps record of the trophies won from thee.'²⁵ This can be compared with the lines from a song that Sri Ramakrishna sang: 'I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kali!'

Evola's opinion that tantra is Western has

been, I think, gaining ground; though not exactly in the way he put it. By pointing to the many interesting parallels between Indian and Greek thought Thomas McEvilley, in his massive study of ancient thought, suggests that one can locate contemporary spiritual modes in a comparative way in both traditions. The far-ranging 'meditation-revolution', the technique of visualization, and the in-depth study of the kundalini phenomenon are some of them. 'It is possible,' McEvilley says, 'that there were such deep inherent linkages between Greek and Indian thought from an early date that the two traditions went on producing like forms to the end of antiquity.' Citing Neoplatonism he says that it needs in-depth comparative study: 'Its general similarity with the Indian and Tibetan practices known as tantric cannot be denied.'²⁶

Similarly, he suggests that Plotinus's instructions to his students have almost exact parallels in tantric practices, in which the characteristic method of meditation is visualization. McEvilley cites the mandala as an instance. Visualization is an unparalleled phenomenon in the Great Master—Swami Yogeshananda's study in this regard remains a classic.²⁷ Gods and goddesses passed through Sri Ramakrishna's person almost as a pageant. But the most arresting episode is the one with Ramlala. The vibrant presence of the deity is palpable, alive, and the entire episode needs to be seen with reverent openness as an instance of 'more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of' in philosophy and even myth. The sadhu who gave the image of Ramlala to Sri Ramakrishna also brought the Vaishnava dimension into the Great Master's visions, validating thus the Vaishnava way.

Above all, Sri Ramakrishna made the electrifying assertion: 'God talked to me. *It was not merely His vision.* Yes, He talked to me. Under the banyan-tree I saw Him coming from the

Ganges. Then we laughed so much! By way of playing with me He cracked my fingers. Then He talked. Yes, He talked to me.'²⁸ Much more astounding is what he says next: 'He revealed to me what is in the Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, and other scriptures' (ibid.). This means that his tantric guru's role was functional and his practice of tantra was an enactment for our age. It is significant that the Great Master tells about his direct vision of God *after* he narrates the breathtaking movement of kundalini in his body! Is it possible that the implicit powers confer a special perception so that visions are transmuted into tangible realities? These are neither mere visions nor, as our neurologists say, 'phantoms of the brain', but timeless and tangible realities!

McEvilley's explorations lead directly to Sri Ramakrishna. He points out that the mystical experiences of Plotinus are of two kinds, comparable and parallel to Patanjali's *savikalpa* and *nirvikalpa samadhis*. 'There is an interesting echo of both,' McEvilley says, 'in the experiences of the nineteenth-century Hindu mystic Ramakrishna. He describes *samadhi* of the former type in which he, as a devotional mystic, seemed to be relating directly to the mother-goddess, and other, formless *samadhi* in which "a man no longer feels the experience of the ego ... The 'I' which may be likened to a salt-doll, melts in the Ocean of (the) Absolute and becomes one with it. Not the slightest trace of distinction is left."²⁹ If the implications are extended further, we can see their generic significance; Solange Lemaître identifies it thus: 'Ramakrishna was perhaps the first in our age to understand and live the previously dissociated and dual activity that consists, on the one hand, of abandoning creation (detachment) in order to find God, and, on the other, of fulfilling creation to the very end, equally in order to find God. ... Then these two poles are no longer mutually exclusive; instead

they form a perfect organic movement.’³⁰ Therefore, Lemaitre says: ‘The true lesson of the great mystic—it would seem—deals, rather than with the so-called “unity” of religions (an idea dear to Shuon and many others), with the *complementariness* of the various experiences that are connected with each’ (214–15).

The Time Has Come for Sri Ramakrishna Tantra

These are necessarily brief glimpses of a very sensitive area. We can now look at some recent forthright views on Sri Ramakrishna tantra expressed in a comparative study of Sri Ramakrishna and Christ by Paul Hourihan. He suggests that the time is ripe to add tantra to Swami Vivekananda’s exposition of Vedanta: ‘Vivekananda said he could have converted half the world if he had preached Ramakrishna instead of Vedanta ... the doctrine that has penetrated everywhere in the West. Now the time has come to add the doctrine of Tantra, the chief application of Vedanta: namely, that within this woman is the soul, is the Godhead, is the whole divine being, and that is the truth of what she is.’³¹ Man and woman are apparent divisions ‘for the sake of just this discovery’ (76).

The very urge to add tantra to Advaita and yoga—rather, to amalgamate them—is a step that controverts many of the brazenly insensitive studies on tantra. The unique figure for this is the Great Master. ‘Ramakrishna,’ says Hourihan, ‘entered into this delicate and arduous sadhana with a motivation unique among practitioners for the nearly two thousand years of its history: to discover if Tantra was spiritually genuine or a series of lascivious exercises masquerading as a religious system. It was, he found, all that its defensive adherents, badgered into theological corners by more prestigious Vedantists and yogis, had for centuries claimed for it: a legitimate entry to the

hidden truths of the universe and to a realization of their Source, the Godhead itself’ (73).

We can conclude that Sri Ramakrishna’s is a re-visioning of tantra, and not just a reformist or revivalist makeover. The key is in his assurance—as Hourihan says, ‘We have emphasized in Ramakrishna’s achievement its application as much as the achievement itself’ (75–6). The application is inclusive: almost all strands of human consciousness with all its real potentialities and apparent anomalies are brought into play. These strands are vividly identified by Hourihan. Moreover, ‘Ramakrishna, the personification of Vedanta as no one before in India, was also the perfection of Tantra—the first God-man known to have not only married and achieved spiritual union with his wife but to have spent so long encompassing the whole of Tantric discipline to expressly assert the degree of its truth, so that, when his wife arrived, he would be able to implement with her its profound teaching.’ Hourihan asserts that tantra’s ‘time has come, Ramakrishna [is] its annunciator. It will liberate man like nothing he has known for many centuries—and woman also.’ He adds, ‘There is an absolutely new current of thought abroad today, respecting the sexes. All feel it. Few have found its meaning. Tantra is its meaning’ (77).

In the light of all this, one can reasonably say that Sri Ramakrishna re-visioned tantra as an efficacious mode of sadhana. Even the most efficacious—if we keep in mind the depth and authenticity of his sadhana, or the vivid descriptions of the nature and ascent of the primal energy, for instance. It remains a perennial frame of authentic experience. An important aspect of this frame is the transcendence of the gross elements once the ‘Serpent Power,’ the primal energy, begins its movement. Besides authenticity, Sri Ramakrishna’s experience can be ‘decoded’ to make it applicable to more than specifically tantric areas. In other words, transpositional under-

standing is sustained by Sri Ramakrishna. For instance, his description of kundalini can also explain the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā doctrine.

As Edward C Dimock has suggested, the sadhaka passes from the gross level to 'a blissful state of pure abstraction from all things physical, a state of *samādhi*. Rāmākṣṇa, who, not himself a Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā, was nonetheless a Tāntric of a sort, writes [*sic*] of this height of experience. By substituting the term *rasa* for *kulakuṇḍalini* and the terms Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa for Śakti and Śiva ... we have a good summary of the Vaiṣṇava-sahajiyā doctrine in the matter.'³² What Dimock cites here is Sri Ramakrishna's description of the movement of the kundalini.

The state of *sahaja*, simplicity, reviewed by Dimock is seen by some studies as a vibrant Void that effortlessly absorbs all dimensions of sadhana. This brings us to a link between the Great Master and the Baul tradition. 'There are many kinds of spiritual aspirants,' says the Master, and he refers to the Bauls: 'The sadhaka, the struggling devotee, does not care so much for elaborate rites. An example of this class is the Baul.'³³

Sri Ramakrishna provides further insights into this tradition in terms of both their practices and the special language they fashioned to conceal what they mean, which is revealed only to the initiate. A Baul devotee asks the Great Master: 'Are you yourself eating, or are you feeding someone else?' This means, Sri Ramakrishna explains, that 'the siddha sees God dwelling within a man.' As for anonymity, there is the funny incident wherein a woman asks Sri Ramakrishna where she can see him. He directs her to go and search. Quite an enactment of a Baul!

The Great Master knew the risks inherent in men and women performing sadhana together. He says: 'The attitude of "hero" is extremely difficult. The Shaktas and the Bauls among the Vaiṣṇavas follow it, but it is very hard to keep one's spir-

itual life pure in that attitude' (377). However, Sri Ramakrishna is so open in his compassion that he endorses even that risky relationship by identifying its implicit positives: 'The conjugal relationship, the attitude of a woman to her husband or sweetheart contains all the rest—serenity, service, friendship, and motherly affection.' The Master then asks M which attitude appeals to his mind. M replies: 'I like them all' (*ibid.*). This reply is absolutely relevant to the Great Master as well: He likes them all, inside out; but gently points to the serpents in this Snakes and Ladders game. In this context, one can say that the tantric may have the art of transfiguring the serpent into a ladder. He removes the fangs!

According to the Shakti cult the siddha is called a koul, and according to the Vedānta, a paramahansa. The Bauls call him a sai. They say, 'No one is greater than a sai.' The sai is a man of supreme perfection. He doesn't see any differentiation in the world. He wears a necklace, one half made of cow bones and the other of the sacred tulsi-plant. He calls the Ultimate Truth 'Alekh', the 'Incomprehensible One'. The Vedas call It 'Brahman'. About the jivas the Bauls say, 'They come from Alekh and they go unto Alekh.' That is to say, the individual soul has come from the Unmanifest and goes back to the Unmanifest. The Bauls will ask you, 'Do you know about the wind?' The 'wind' means the great current that one feels in the subtle nerves, Ida, Pingala, and Sushumna, when the Kundalini is awakened. They will ask you further, 'In which station are you dwelling?' According to them there are six 'stations', corresponding to the six psychic centres of Yoga. If they say that a man dwells in the 'fifth station', it means that his mind has climbed to the fifth centre, known as the Vishuddha chakra. (To M) At that time he sees the Formless.

—The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 513

The Bauls bring us to the most fascinating aspect of Sri Ramakrishna tantra: the songs found in the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*. One is simply bowled over by the wealth of themes, the variety of moods, the galaxy of singers and composers. Sri Ramakrishna himself sings enchantingly and dances ecstatically—like a seasoned dervish. In his authoritative and comprehensive study of dervishes, John P Brown says that their basic insight is this: ‘God only exists. He is in all things and all things are in Him.’³⁴ And, interestingly, these Sufis declare: ‘There does not really exist any difference between good and evil, for all is reduced to unity, and God is the real author of the acts of mankind’ (11). Describing a dervish, Brown draws a fascinating parallel between Sufism and Vedanta, and defines a Paramahansa: ‘He who, renouncing all labour, reaches the state or condition called *paramahansa*, or the ascetic of the last degree, frequents the *tirtha* of the Spirit, knows all, in all things through the proper nature of the sovereign Spirit, becomes immortal, viz. absolutely free’ (48).

The author perhaps did not know that a Paramahansa was there during the very time he made these observations, and even practised Islamic sadhana! The songs sung by Sri Ramakrishna need an in-depth study—an ongoing project of mine—but obviously what he could not phrase in prose, he suggested through songs. These songs are a combination of *rasa*, mood, and *dhvani*, poetic suggestion—inexhaustible nuggets for contemplation. Hence, the significant interest this area is acquiring now.

The mention of songs in the *Gospel* brings to mind their counterpart of themes, music, and singers—as many paths as there are seekers. But Mark Dyczkowski—one of the few authentic and original interpreters of Shaivism, tantric perspectives, and related areas—sees the Great Master in a uniquely refreshing manner. He says


that ‘those who believe in many paths to one goal betray all the paths and every goal unless they choose one of them from which to view the others. Otherwise, if none of those available is appealing, they must make a new “Multiple Path” to reach their “Multiple Goal”.’

He contextualizes Sri Ramakrishna in these terms and says: ‘There have been very few, if any, truly multi-religious, fully realised souls. The most famous example is Rāmakṛṣṇa.’ Describing how Sri Ramakrishna’s sadhana exemplified something remarkable, Dyczkowski points out: ‘Although a devotee of Mother Kālī, directed by his teacher of the Advaita path he slashed her to pieces with the “sword of discrimination” when she appeared before him and entered into such profound contemplation of the absolute *Brahman* that he could not be roused for months.’ Similarly, Dyczkowski notes that Sri Ramakrishna ‘loved Lord Kṛṣṇa so intensely he identified himself completely with Rādhā’. In the case of Rama the identity was with Hanuman, and Sri Ramakrishna ‘lived in trees and even grew a tail. He even had a vision of Jesus.’

‘However, in each case Rāmakṛṣṇa reports’, says Dyczkowski, ‘that to prepare him for the new path and its goal, his mind was miraculously emptied of all his memories.’ This has remarkable implications: Sri Ramakrishna’s ‘example confirms that practice conforms to theory—each goal is on its own separate path, so it is impossible to be on more than one path at a time and to have more than one goal. Otherwise, you would have to be more than one person, which is not impossible, but far from psychologically integrating. Rāmakṛṣṇa was more “open minded” than Abhinavagupta.’

Explaining this, Dyczkowski says, ‘He understood his experience to mean that the many paths and their many goals were all equally the result of the joyful sport of the Mother. She is Maya—not

the one who “obscures and deludes” the devotees who are followers of the “isolated fragments of a single tradition” but the Maya who enlightens and inspires in myriad ways. She, the Mother of the Universe is, of course, Rāmakṛṣṇa’s path and his goal.³⁵

Those are thoughtful insights that reflect the necessity to re-vision Sri Ramakrishna’s tantra, and see his ‘openness’ subsume and yet go farther than, for instance, Abhinavagupta and others, as suggested. The metaphor of music that Dyczkowski offers can be applied to Sri Ramakrishna’s tantra: it is a ‘heavenly choir’ that subsumes every part without smoothening any. *Samarasya*, is the key to re-visioning Sri Ramakrishna tantra. 

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Influence of Sri Ramakrishna on the Hindi Poet Nirala

Prof. Awadesh Pradhan

Suryakant Tripathi
'Nirala'



DEVOTIONAL POETRY—the poetry of Tulasi-Surdas, Kabir-Jayasi, Mir-Raskhan—is the golden pinnacle of the entire Hindi literature. If any other genre of literature could be considered next in the order of superiority, it would be the Chayavad poetry of modern Hindi—the poetry of Prasad-Nirala, Pant-Mahadevi. Nirala was not only a poet of the Chayavad tradition but he was the best poet of the entire modern Hindi poetry. Both his personality and poetry are unparalleled. Though the entire Chayavad poetry carried a deep impress of Rabindranath Tagore, Nirala is more influenced by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition.

It is well known that Nirala had received the love and blessings of Swami Saradananda and Swami Premananda, direct monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and brother disciples of Swami Vivekananda. Nirala was in contact with the Ramakrishna Math at Belur, West Bengal. While in Udbodhan office, he also assisted in the editing of the Hindi journal *Samanvaya*. The erstwhile president of Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Swami Madhavananda desired to bring out a journal in Hindi. He sought an editor from the epoch-maker of Hindi, Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who recommended Nirala. Swami Madhavananda wrote to Nirala in English asking for his credentials, to which Nirala replied in Bengali. In the words

of Nirala: 'Staying in Bengal, I was acquainted with the literature of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. I had visited the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur, a couple of times for the service of the poor. I had recited the Tulasi Ramayana to the monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Premananda at Mahishadal, and had received his unmatched love and blessings. I had given sufficient proof of this qualification of mine in the correspondence with Swami Madhavananda.'¹

At that time a person suitable for the work of *Samanvaya* was found in Calcutta itself, but that did not work out. Within eight months the editor was changed twice. It was then that Swami Atmabodhananda, the manager of *Samanvaya*, called Nirala. A Hindi editor who knew Bengali was needed there. Nirala fulfilled this need. He went to Udbodhan Office, Baghbazar in 1922 and started living there. 'It was here that I first met Swami Saradanandaji Maharaj. That was 1922' (348).

Swami Saradananda gave him spiritual initiation by writing the mantra on his neck with his fingers. The Swami said, 'We believe Sri Ramakrishna to be God.' Nirala replied, 'I too believe that.' What happened next, read in Nirala's own words: 'He came in front of me absorbed in the mood of guru. I felt as if I was drowning in a cool shadow. Then he started writing a mantra with his fingers on my neck. I tried hard to fix my mind on the neck and read what he was writing, but I could not understand anything' (350). After this Nirala got many spiritual experiences and dreams. One

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day he saw in a dream: 'There was a luminous sea, my head was resting on the arms of Shyama, I was moving with the waves' (351). Another day he was able to understand the mantra. 'After three years the mantra too came glistening like fire in front of me, I read it then' (351). A sample of Nirala's high regard for Swami Saradananda can be had from this sentence: 'Before this great philosopher, great poet, self-resplendent, contemplative, evercelibate, sannyasi, great scholar, all-renouncing personality like Mahavira, the position of god Indra, and even moksha are insignificant' (349).

In the May-June 1922 number of *Samanvaya*, Nirala wrote his first article on Sri Ramakrishna 'Bharat mein Sri Ramakrishna Avatar' (The incarnation of Sri Ramakrishna in India). This article was influenced by the structure of logic and style of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* by Swami Saradananda. In it Nirala discusses in detail the greatness of human beings; the goal of human life is to be established in Brahman; the harmony of mutually-conflicting principles in creation; the dichotomy of enjoyment and renunciation, virtue and vice; the incarnation of God upon the decline of virtue and prevalence of vice; and the spread of the materialistic and hedonistic civilization in India. In the last paragraph he talks about the incarnation of Sri Ramakrishna in this manner:

This time Sri Ramakrishna incarnated to show to torture-afflicted people and people blinded by enjoyment the way to peace. This time too India became the centre for the establishment of peace. The spiritual current that is flowing today in the world has its source in the great embodiment of the spiritual principle, Sri Ramakrishna. The voice of brotherhood that echoes in global society today first came from the mouth of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna. The world is mesmerised in listening to the heroic words of the world-conquering lion of Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda; but his divine edu-

cation had culminated at the feet of Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna, who is the expert gardener of the flower blossoming today in the vine of unity in India' (6.42).

His second article titled 'Jatiya Jivan Aur Sri Ramakrishna' (Sri Ramakrishna and National Life) was printed in the March-April 1923 number of *Samanvaya*. Though this article has more discussion on Sri Ramakrishna, the introduction or the discussion on national life runs into four pages. It mentions that the national uniqueness of India is liberation-seeking and not enjoyment-seeking, and its national life is led not by kings or wealthy people but by all-renouncing great men established in samadhi: 'Wherever we see, we find only great souls like Sri Krishna, Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, Sri Chaitanya who incarnated to bring back to life the withered national life of India. We always find such great minds established in the leadership of India' (49). Though Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuja, and the like worked for the welfare of the country, their paths were mutually-conflicting. The intellect of Shankara was great, but his heart was not; Ramanuja mainly gave importance to the heart. The religion of the heart hastened national decline for want of intellect. Moreover, the narrowness of the custom of untouchability spread its influence. *Tamas*, inertia, was already in abundance, and the coming of the English increased the strength of *rajas*, activity. On the one hand, western customs and thoughts spread in India due to the influence of the education policy of the British, on the other, a reaction to this tightened the grip of scriptural traditions and customs: 'In this manner, in every field, there was a tussle between the ignorance of the old and grown-ups and the civilization of the newly civilized' (52).

Even the reformers were not constructive but destructive. 'Some were conceited at bringing life

to the nation by denouncing idol-worship, while some others, being ostracized by pundits, resolved to bring back the nation to life by creating a new society themselves. On the other side, western Christian priests were singing their own tune. By hook or by crook, they were baptizing lower sections of the society or anyone in flesh and blood they could put their hands on' (ibid.). Sri Ramakrishna incarnated to bring out India from this great difficulty: 'This time Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna incarnated to enlighten the national life' (ibid.). He was himself perfect; all his spiritual practices were for the education of the world. Having practised the spiritual disciplines of tantra, various moods of bhakti like *dasya* and *madhura*, Vedanta, Islam, and Christianity, he arrived at the truth that all paths have come out from the same Soul and will lead one to that same Supreme Soul: 'That is the national life of Hindus as known from Vedanta' (54). Swami Vivekananda imbibed the ethos of the harmony of religions from Sri Ramakrishna, which he preached to the entire world. The victory of Swami Vivekananda at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and his preaching sojourns in the West were all the result of the spiritual plans of Sri Ramakrishna: 'In order to rejuvenate India, the spiritual power of Sri Ramakrishna connected it with another independent nation, gave peace to the seekers of knowledge around the world, and created a great stir in the thought traditions of the world' (ibid.).

In Sri Ramakrishna one can observe a synthesis of Shankara's great intellect and Buddha's broad heart. One of the special characteristics of his message is the non-conflicting nature of this synthesis:

Earlier prophets had destroyed one religion and established another by the sharp luminescence of scholarship, but the modern prophet Sri Ramakrishna brought about the development

of high principles and harmony of religions through his teachings, clear even to a child, that came out from his dedication and simplicity. Directly perceiving the great power of consciousness not only in humans but also in rocks and stones, he proclaimed that the principles of idol-worship as well as the highest Vedanta are true. Treat each person with respect, the same Lord resides in everyone; if you contradict anyone, you will be contradicting the Lord and will have to face the consequences of such contradiction' (54-5).

It was the influence of this non-contradictory religion that did not keep Sri Ramakrishna confined to a single tradition, but he 'became the inner soul of all traditions' (54).

Nirala affirms that Sri Ramakrishna is not only a world teacher but that he is truth itself: 'Sri Ramakrishna is one who is traversing every path of spiritual discipline and getting merged in the truth—has no existence apart from truth. The great spiritual principles, descending from the resplendent bliss of wholeness touch the pristine light of truth that is Sri Ramakrishna, who dwells in the realm of mind and speech and is established in society as a world teacher' (ibid.). Talking about Sri Ramakrishna Nirala also feels that it is impossible to give his 'spiritual introduction' (69). At another place he writes: 'I will not discuss how great he was or is; even if I attempt, I will not be able to do so' (152).

The 5 April 1924 number of the weekly *Matvala* carried Nirala's article 'Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna Deva'. In this article too, after discussing in detail the principle of incarnation, a brief description of Sri Ramakrishna is made. When there was a deluge of religions, traditions, and spiritual paths in India, and when the western world was experiencing non-fulfilment and lack of peace due to excessive enjoyment, at that time Sri Ramakrishna came with the message of

true religion filled with supreme peace. 'This time, the embodiment of religion, purer than purity itself, unparalleled in the history of the world, the great soul Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna Deva was born. Of all the histories of superhuman personalities available to us today—and only in India they can be so many—such completeness is not seen in any of them. As the chain of ignorance of materialism is on the rise, so does the picture of the completeness of spirituality appear bright' (68–9) The long introduction to this article of Nirala on Sri Ramakrishna intends to outline the incarnation of Sri Ramakrishna as a historical necessity. He writes: 'The world was in need of such an ideal saint who would bring together the world in one bond of religion' (69). In Ramakrishna, this need of the world was fulfilled.

In the April-May 1929 number of *Samanvaya* Nirala's lengthy article titled 'Yugavatar Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna' depicts the entire life of Sri Ramakrishna. In the beginning Nirala has stressed the uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna among other heroes of the Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century. The work of other social reformers was intellectual. 'But there was no special exposition of the eternal truth of Hindus by the Arya Samaj or the Brahmo Samaj—nowhere was available the reply that would satisfy the doubting minds. Those places have sounded trumpets of their own fundamentalism, their own reform. The forgotten notes of tunes that had been playing all along were not introduced. This was because there was no such talented true Indian who had turned to social reform after realizing God. Their work was intellectual' (101).

Sri Ramakrishna did not start a new sect, a new society, or a new tradition. He presented a liberal exposition of the eternal truth of religion—the truth that he himself had realized—that put an end to all sectarian conflicts. That is why he could cast his influence on Keshabchandra Sen,

Swami Dayananda, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, and Girishchandra Ghosh. Stressing the greatness and uniqueness of the spiritual personality of Sri Ramakrishna in the entire world, Nirala wrote: 'As a reader of spiritual literature, I can strongly affirm that in the spiritual literature of the world there is no one so unique, great, ascetic, conqueror of senses, and endowed with infinite feelings, who can be compared with Sri Ramakrishna; no one has assumed such a huge responsibility. The harmony of Sri Krishna's Bhagavadgita could not remain unarmed, but Sri Ramakrishna's harmony of religions, though unarmed, is victorious in a unique way' (107). Earlier in life Nirala used to scoff at the idea of Sri Ramakrishna being an incarnation, but later he was thoroughly convinced of this: 'He had himself told Swami Vivekananda that he who is Rama and who is Krishna, is at present Ramakrishna. Earlier I used to laugh on reading this part, but now I have full faith in this; as if there were no other place to go but to Sri Ramakrishna when one thinks of anything divine; as if he had encompassed the entire divine nature' (ibid.).


Nirala begins the article 'Sri Deva Ramakrishna Paramahansa', published in the March 1932 number of the monthly *Madhuri*, filled with the same feeling and quoting the verse '*sthapakaya cha dharmasya ...*' composed by Swami Vivekananda. He wrote in favour of Sri Ramakrishna being the greatest of incarnations: 'As far as I have studied the Dharmashastras, as far as I know of the history of saints and incarnations, I have not seen such a great incarnation in the spiritual literature of India. The great incarnation Shankara can be compared in knowledge, character, and in the eloquent exposition of the scriptures, only with Swami Vivekananda; Sri Ramakrishna is unparalleled. ... The qualities of Sri Ramakrishna are partially present in the literature of Swami Vivekananda. This has been told

by Swamiji himself' (135). In this article Nirala has committed a factual error—he has given a list of seventeen, instead of the actual sixteen, monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, in which he has omitted the name of Swami Advaitananda and has wrongly included the names of Swamis Nirmalananda and Satchidananda.

Nirala was well-acquainted with the fact that 'the ethos of Sri Ramakrishna has acquired a special place in world literature' (55). He was very familiar with the renaissance in Bengali literature brought about by the influence of Sri Ramakrishna. In this respect, he had given the highest place to the emperor of the theatre Girishchandra Ghosh. In my view, if any personality of the Indian literature has a place after Girishchandra Ghosh in this respect, that person is Nirala—at least in Hindi literature he is the greatest writer who has been so influenced by the Ramakrishna tradition. Apart from writing independent articles in *Samanvaya*, *Matvala*, and *Madhuri*, he translated the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* into Hindi under the title *Ramakrishna Vachanamrita*.

It is impossible that the poetry of such a poet could be untouched by this influence. In the beginning of his poem 'Seva Prarambh' (The Beginning of Service) in the collection *Anamika* (The Unnamed), there is a wonderful romantic description of the 'new spiritual practice of the people of India,' which was awakened by the sadhana of Sri Ramakrishna. On one side, the chariot of science was moving ahead, noisily proclaiming its victory over the world; big iron machines akin to large contraptions of death were sucking the intestines of humans—earth, water, and sky are all within its reach—the weapons of war are increasing, all around there is the turmoil of death and the human being is weakened by the poison of conceit; selfish voices are echoing everywhere, enmities between this and that sect are increasing; side by side co-exist the search for more life-destroying weapons

and the Nobel peace prize, while politics is stinging like a cobra—how unlucky is this civilization. On the other side, through the young disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, the spiritual currents of jnana-yoga-bhakti-karma are flowing across the entire earth breaking the stony sides. Householders also come and join them. On one side, there is the din of machines and on the other, the great power of Atman is silently doing its work.

Nirala's poem entitled 'Swami Premanandaji Maharaj' compiled in *Anima* specially describes the visit of Swami Premananda to Mahishadal amongst the masses, beyond the notions of untouchability, the high and the low, establishing a hearty relation among human beings—especially the deep compassion of Sri Ramakrishna for the forsaken and insulted. The poem 'Yugavatara Sri Ramakrishna Deva ke Prati' (To Sri Ramakrishna, the Incarnation of the Present Age) compiled in *Naye Patte* (New Leaves) describes the divine incarnation of Sri Ramakrishna in a mystical manner. Just like the different spiritual embodiments of Rama, Sita, Mahavira, Christ, and Muhammad appeared before Sri Ramakrishna at different periods of his sadhana and got merged in him, Mahashakti appears before Rama, pleased by his worship, and bestows the boon of victory to him. This idea is present in Nirala's famous and exquisite poem 'Rama ki Shaktipuja' (The Shakti Worship of Rama). Just as Sri Ramakrishna, coming down from the greatest heights of samadhi, called upon the Divine Mother all his life—'Mother, Mother'—with childlike simplicity, Nirala, from the beginning of his poetic life till the end, wrote tender and bright poems in prayer to the Divine Mother, poems that are unparalleled in the entire history of Hindi literature. 

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Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Chinmoy

Dr Kusumita P Pedersen

SRI CHINMOY IS WIDELY KNOWN as the exponent of a spirituality of transformation, a philosopher, a poet, a musician and artist, a humanitarian, and a server of peace. Born in Chittagong in East Bengal, present Bangladesh, in 1931, he spent his youth at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and lived in New York from 1964 until his passing in 2007. For his entire life, Sri Chinmoy cherished a most intimate inner connection with Sri Ramakrishna, whom he profoundly loved and held in the highest possible regard. In addition to the special kinship claimed by many Bengalis, this connection was a spiritual one. Those who met Sri Chinmoy during his lifetime and who knew about Sri Ramakrishna could clearly see this oneness; it is also abundantly evident in his written and musical works. In personal conversation through the years, Sri Chinmoy's references to Sri Ramakrishna were always frequent and spontaneous, flooded with affection and an in-depth knowledge of the Master's life and teachings. His writings contain many quotations from the Master and recount numerous events from his life and those of his disciples. For Sri Chinmoy, it is incontestable and basic that Sri Ramakrishna is one of the greatest teachers about God and God-realization and that he is a paradigm for spiritual life. As Sri Chinmoy says in 'Ramakrishna', one of his many poems about the Master:

He was born in a tiny
Obscure Bengali village.
He lived in a tiny corner
Of a big temple.
A Kali-worshipper he was.
A man-lover he became.
A world-teacher he is
And
Forever shall remain.¹

Sri Chinmoy powerfully affirms the harmony of his own philosophy with that of Sri Ramakrishna and declares him to be a guide for all humanity. We may see both of them as part of a single stream of spirituality in our time, which has its source in India but now inundates the world.

The Voice of Vivekananda

Chinmoy Kumar Ghose was born in the village of Shakpura in Chittagong, the youngest of seven children in a well-off Kayastha family. The family deity was Mother Kali, so an affinity with Sri Ramakrishna could already be felt in a way that was deep and enduring: while he communed with the Supreme in many forms, wherever he was throughout his life, Sri Chinmoy always kept an image of Mother Kali near him. The oldest child in his family, Hriday Ranjan (1911–76) was a spiritual seeker and a student of philosophy. When he was seven or eight years old, Hriday started praying to Mother Kali. When he later learned through reading that Sri Ramakrishna was the dearest child of Mother Kali, he was spiritually drawn to the Master and came into contact with some of Sri Ramakrishna's

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disciples. Not only Hriday but also other members of the family were spiritual aspirants and sensed an inner connection with the Master and Swami Vivekananda; all were devoted to Sri Ramakrishna and called him 'Thakur'. In time Hriday found his guru in Sri Aurobindo and at the age of twenty-two became a permanent resident of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. In 1936, while on a journey to South India to see Hriday, the family visited Dakshineswar. Many years later Sri Chinmoy would recall that during this pilgrimage, even as a child of four, he experienced the presence of Sri Ramakrishna while at the Panchavati. When their parents Shashi Kumar and Yogamaya died one year apart in 1942 and 1943, all of the brothers and sisters not already residing there moved to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Here Sri Chinmoy lived from the age of twelve to thirty-two when, responding to a call from within, he travelled to New York to begin his service of teaching and inspiring spiritual seekers.

In the Sri Aurobindo Ashram the young Chinmoy lived in a community where the spiritual height of Sri Ramakrishna was fully recognized and which was saturated with his direct influence. Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) regarded Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as establishers of the spiritual work he further developed in his own philosophy of Integral Yoga. Among his many statements about Sri Ramakrishna's importance, he says:

When scepticism had reached its height, the time had come for spirituality to assert itself and establish the reality of the world as a manifestation of the spirit, the secret of the confusion created by the senses, the magnificent possibilities of man and the ineffable beatitude of God. This is the work whose consummation Sri Ramakrishna came to begin and all the development of the previous two thousand years

and more since Buddha appeared, has been a preparation for the harmonisation of spiritual teaching and experience by the Avatar of Dakshineswar. ...

A new era dates from his birth, an era in which the peoples of the earth will be lifted for a while into communion with God and spiritually become the dominant note of human life.²

He also states that, during his imprisonment (1908–9) in Alipore Jail, 'I was hearing constantly the voice of Vivekananda speaking to me for a fortnight in the jail in my solitary meditation and feeling his presence' (26.68). At this time Vivekananda instructed Sri Aurobindo inwardly on one very specific aspect of spiritual attainment. Sri Chinmoy dramatized the life of Sri Aurobindo in *The Descent of the Blue*, a play written in 1958 while he was living in the ashrama. Here is how he portrays this event:

(Aurobindo in his cell. Early morning.)

Aurobindo: I wonder from where this fragrance is coming. There is no flower nearby, nor even a gentle breeze. (A voice breaks out in the silence.)

Voice: I am Vivekananda. I want to speak to you about the workings of the consciousness above the mind.

Aurobindo: Above the mind?

Voice: Yes. I myself had no idea of such workings while I was in the body. Now I have it and I will help you with it. For this I shall visit you every day for about two weeks.

Aurobindo: I believe these workings would lead towards some Supreme Dynamic Knowledge.

Voice: That is for you to discover. I can but show what I have found. The world's burden of progress rests upon your shoulders. It is a great happiness to find you ready to bear it. Godspeed.

(The spirit of Vivekananda disappears.)³

Sri Chinmoy's rendering of this extraordinary interchange emphasizes the continuity of the labours of these two spiritual masters for the benefit of the world and their conscious collaboration in the inner realm.

My Mother's Nectar

The writings of Sri Chinmoy are very extensive and include poetry, essays and lectures, aphorisms, answers to questions, stories and plays. Though mostly in English, they also include works in Bengali. In his writings, in all genres, Sri Chinmoy mentions Sri Ramakrishna often.

One of Sri Chinmoy's earliest works is a tribute to Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda in the form of a play interspersed with songs. It was originally written in Bengali in India—probably in the early 1950s—and was later revised and translated into English by its author, and published in 1973 as *Drink, Drink My Mother's Nectar*. The play is in twelve scenes centring on the relationship of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda but including other events as well, its wording often following closely the original Bengali of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Very affecting in performance, it remains a favourite with the students of Sri Chinmoy. Through this play and many stories, poems, and songs Sri Chinmoy has encouraged his own students to venerate and learn from Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda.

The very first of the thirteen thousand songs in Bengali that Sri Chinmoy composed is, as he has said, a prayer of Swami Vivekananda for divine compassion during a time of difficulty, the haunting 'Tamasa Rate Nayan Pate': 'In the dark and dense night, / You cast Your benign Eyes upon me.'⁴ The second of these songs is gently lilting and expresses intense adoration, the experience that Sri Ramakrishna's disciples would have as they sat before him when he was in samadhi.

*Sundara hate sundara tumi
Nandana bana majhe
Nishidin jena antare mor
Tomari murati raje
Tumi chhara mor nayan andhar
Sakali mithya sakali asar
Chaudike mor bishwa bhubane
Bedanar sur baje
Pabo kigo dekha nimesher tare
Ei jibaner majhe*

You are beautiful, more beautiful,
most beautiful,
Beauty unparalleled in the garden of Eden.
Day and night may Your Image abide
In the very depth of my heart.
Without You my eyes have no vision,
Everything is an illusion, everything is barren.
All around me, within and without,
The melody of tenebrous pangs I hear.
My world is filled with excruciating pangs.
O Lord, O my beautiful Lord,
O my Lord of Beauty,
In this lifetime, even for a fleeting second,
May I be blessed with the boon to see
Your Face.

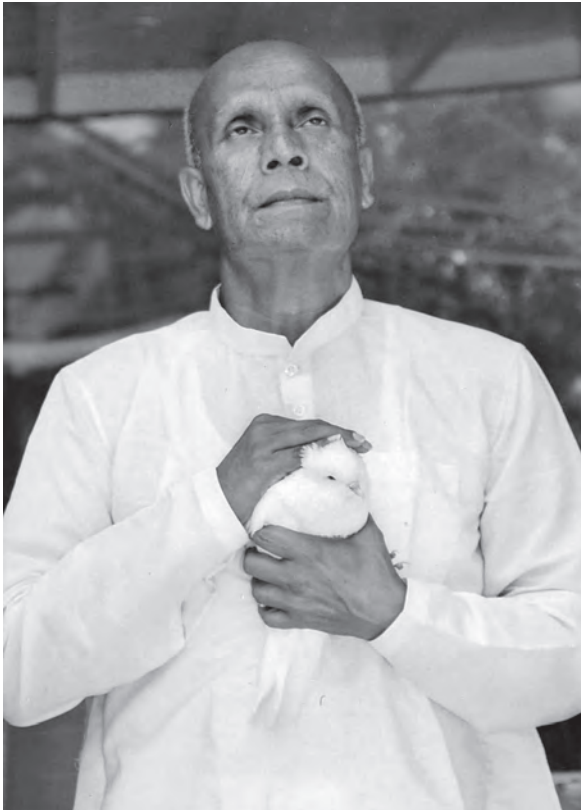
The third, with a stirring and soaring melody, expresses the indomitable spirit of Swamiji as he set out for the West for the first time:

*Jago amar swapan sathi
Jago amar praner pran
Jago amar chokher jyoti
Rishi kabi murtiman,
Jago, jago, jago
Jago amar bishal hiya
Byapta jaha bishwamoy
Jago amar sei chetana
Bishwatite shesh ja noy
Jago jago jago
Jago amar dhyani-swarup
Jago amar baddha jib
Sarba jiber tandra tuti
Jago amar mukta shib
Jago jago jago*

Arise, awake, O friend of my dream.
 Arise, awake, O breath of my life.
 Arise, awake, O light of my eyes.
 O seer-poet in me,
 Do manifest yourself in me and through me.
 Arise, awake, O vast heart within me.
 Arise, awake, O consciousness of mine,
 Which is always transcending the universe
 And its own life of the Beyond.
 Arise, awake, O form of my meditation
 transcendental.
 Arise, awake, O bound divinity in humanity.
 Arise, awake, O my heart's Liberator, Shiva,
 And free mankind from its ignorance-sleep.

These three songs and several others are incorporated into *Drink, Drink My Mother's Nectar*, enhancing the atmosphere of soulful devotion when the play is staged.

Sri Chinmoy



To commemorate the one hundredth birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda in 1962, Sri Chinmoy wrote a series of essays, collected as *The Disciple and the Master: A Centenary Offering*. In 'The Child of Kali', he offers this reflection:

Ramakrishna will appear to one as a man of overflowing emotion, to a second as an ardent aspirant, to a third as a man of philosophical wisdom, to a fourth as a man of unique sincerity. It is obvious that different persons should possess different opinions regarding his personality. For in a matter like this, a flawless analysis on an intellectual basis is next to impossible, and all our human judgement must sadly fail to yield any useful result. But nobody will ever hesitate to call him the most beloved child of Kali the Mother. His sole aim in life was to have nothing save and except a constant union with the Mother Kali. His aim he did fulfil. And in one word we can sum up the message of his life: *Mā*.

Here Sri Chinmoy says and also shows that by using the heart rather than the ordinary mind one can come closer to a real understanding of who Sri Ramakrishna is. He continues:

His trance-bound countenance, the simplicity of his expression, his unassuming and genial manner, the lucid cordiality of his relationship with all, coupled with his magnificently hallowed life and divine lore won for him a universal attraction and devotion. It was Ramakrishna who peacefully housed in himself the Cosmic and the Trans-Cosmic Consciousness with all possible inclusiveness of outlook. What he felt was spontaneous. What he said was spontaneous. What he did was spontaneous. He had no purpose of his own, and whatever we apparently hold to be his purpose, that too, to our astonishment, was never influenced by the stream of desire. He had no will of his own save that of his Mother Kali.⁵

In this passage the Master practically seems to appear before us and we feel as if we are meeting him in a real, living encounter. This vivid immediacy that Sri Chinmoy is able to capture in words, as well as his unreserved appreciation and deep understanding of Sri Ramakrishna, are manifestations of his boundless love and feeling of inseparable oneness with him.

One century after Swami Vivekananda's participation in the 1893 Parliament of Religions, Sri Chinmoy offered the opening meditation at the inaugural plenary of the centenary Parliament in Chicago. To honour the one hundredth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda's arrival in the West, in 1993 Sri Chinmoy published a volume collecting his writings and songs on Swami Vivekananda, including thirty-nine new poems and aphorisms, one for each year of the swami's earthly life. As well, beginning in the early 1990s Sri Chinmoy composed over one hundred songs that set to music the utterances of Sri Ramakrishna, the sayings of Swami Vivekananda and his poems, and songs dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda, and Sister Nivedita. One of the first of this series is:

*Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna,
joy hok taba joy!
Kalir dulal sarva dharma
tomate samanvoy.*

Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna, may your victory be proclaimed! The darling child of Mother Kali, in you all religions become one.⁶

Sri Chinmoy also composed hundreds of songs addressed to the Divine Mother, including many to Kali in particular, and songs that invoke Sri Ramakrishna's spirit such as 'Ay Ma Shyama Pagli Amar': 'O my mad Mother, come, come! Your mad son is crying for you.'⁷ In addition he wrote two books of stories retelling incidents from the lives of Girishchandra Ghosh

and Nag Mahashay, well-known disciples of Sri Ramakrishna.⁸

Sri Ramakrishna, the Soul-power

Sri Chinmoy was once asked the difference between his own spiritual path and that of Sri Ramakrishna. His answer was that there is virtually none, and that both are the path of love, devotion, and surrender to the Supreme.⁹ At the centre of Sri Chinmoy's philosophy is aspiration, the longing for a higher and deeper reality, which he speaks of as an 'inner hunger', an 'inner mounting flame', and an 'inner cry'. This cry is none other than the cry that Sri Ramakrishna tells us is indispensable for God-realization. Without this aspiration-cry no spiritual life can exist, but with an intense cry all can be attained—as the Master says, the Mother reveals everything if the devotee cries to her with a yearning heart.¹⁰ Sri Chinmoy affirms this as a core teaching of Sri Ramakrishna and identifies the cry for God in its highest form as an essential aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's divine consciousness.

Sri Chinmoy looks upon Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as inseparable, saying: 'The Master and the disciple were hardly two distinct individuals. Each helped to shape the other. To our deeper vision, they formed an integral whole.'¹¹ He movingly expresses this unity in a poem that is a dialogue between the Master and his beloved disciple.

My Naren,
You have struggled and struggled,
You have fought and fought
To manifest me.

Our Thakur,
You have cried and cried,
You have served and served
To illumine me.

My Naren,
Your heart of love,

Your mind of light
Are my giant shoulders.

Our Thakur,
Your Feet of Compassion,
Your Eyes of Perfection
Are my Dream-Boat
And
Reality-Shore.¹²

Sri Chinmoy consistently affirms the sublime level of realization and the world-historical role of Sri Ramakrishna, invariably including him when naming great masters, saviours, and avatars. The following especially elaborated statement is from a lecture given in 1971 at Harvard University:

The mind-power, the heart-power, and the soul-power of the Upanishadic consciousness are boundless. In the realm of philosophy, Shankara embodies the mind-power; in the realm of dynamic spirituality, Maharshi Ramana, the great sage of Arunachala, embodies the mind-power. The Christ, the Buddha and Sri Chaitanya of Nadia, Bengal, embody the heart-power. Sri Krishna and Sri Ramakrishna embody the soul-power. In Sri Aurobindo the vision of the mind-power reached its zenith, and the realisation of the soul-power found its fulfilling manifestation on earth. These spiritual giants and others are steering the life-boat of humanity towards the transcendental Abode of the Supreme.¹³

Here the 'Upanishadic consciousness' means the consciousness that possesses the full realization of God or Truth. This infinite consciousness is one and universal, but the great world-teachers embody and manifest it in different ways. Humankind is on a journey of transformation towards the goal of perfection. This voyage may be long and at times through stormy seas, but one day the boat of humanity will arrive at the shore of the beyond. Its arrival is destined, Sri Chinmoy declares, because it is

guided by Sri Ramakrishna and other masters of the highest stature who are one with the infinite truth and light.¹⁴



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14. I would like to express my gratitude to the following people, discussions with whom have been invaluable in writing this essay: Paree Atkin, Ratan Barua, Vidagdha Bennett, Sabyasachi Ghosh Dastidar, Nemi Fredner, Radha Honig, Khoushedul Islam, Mahatapa Palit, B Ramamoorthy, Ranjit Swanson, and Shivaram Thrissur.



The Natural Way to Intimacy with God: Sri Ramakrishna's Gift

Dr Rita D Sherma

THERE ARE THREE WAYS to experience intimacy with God. The first is through *vandana*, veneration and worship. The second is through the communion of bhakti, devotion. The third is by way of the union that occurs in *nirvikalpa samadhi* through jnana, the capacity to discriminate between the eternal and the ephemeral.

Vandana is common in the world's spiritual traditions; it is the first or elementary approach to God. The second stage is the stream of devotional love, which we enter by means of bhakti. The third stage is the complete disappearance of the sense of a self, the awareness of the 'I'. The sense of an isolated self that engages in action and the belief in its unconditioned, independent agency to do so is termed *ahamkara*. The dissolution of the I-awareness results in the withdrawal of the senses from the field of phys-

ical awareness, and immersion in the luminous omnipresent intelligence-consciousness that Vedanta calls Brahman.

Jnana and Bhakti

This final stage of the human encounter with the Divine is known to have its own levels and layers, but the methods used to attain even the primary stages of this transcendent awareness—where relationship with God is surpassed and union is achieved—are usually understood to fall under the rubric of jnana. While *vandana* is understood by all and bhakti by many, the concepts and methods of jnana are not well understood by most. Yet, historically, many have believed that only by the methods of jnana can the highest samadhi be attained. However, after the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and the widely disseminated teachings of Swami Vivekananda it became common practice—and remains so—for Hindu religious teachers to insist that bhakti and jnana are not distinct methods but are really of one piece. The following citation by Swami Krishnananda, who was the general secretary of the Divine Life

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Society from 1961 until his death in 2001, encapsulates this position:

I have been telling you sometimes that there is some secret meaning behind the last words in the Eleventh Chapter of the Gita when we are told that *bhakti* is supreme. ... Therefore Bhagavan Sri Krishna says 'Not charity, not philanthropy, not study, not austerity, is capable of bringing about this great vision that you had, Arjuna! Only by devotion can I be seen, contacted. Only by devotion am I capable of being known, seen and entered into.' These three words are used in the Bhagavad Gita at the end of the Eleventh Chapter—*knowing, seeing and entering*. ...

Knowing is considered by such thinkers like Ramanuja, the great propounder of the Visishtadvaita philosophy, as inferior to devotion. Knowledge or *jnana* is not equal to *bhakti*, says Ramanuja. And Acharya Sankara says that *jnana* is superior to *bhakti*. ... Why does Bhagavan Sri Krishna say that nothing can make you fit to see the vision of God, to behold Him, except *bhakti*? It would seem that He speaks like Ramanuja and not like Sankara. But they are only speaking in different languages ... the same thing.¹

There are serious bhakti *sampradayas*, orders, and *paramparas*, traditions, that give primacy to devotion and have always insisted on the critical importance of relationality and imagination that would not concur with the above analysis. The dismissal of the distinctiveness of these two paths does not do justice to either and also muddies their specificity. Sri Ramakrishna neither asserted the position that one or the other method was superior, nor maintained that 'they are one and the same'. To be sure, he made it clear that they could lead to the same result of *paroksha-jnana*, direct experiential knowledge of the supreme Reality. However, he took great pains to (i) explicate their specificity, (ii) ex-

plain that the suitability of either method was dependent on the seeker's nature, and (iii) assert that the vast majority of seekers would make more progress through the methods of bhakti. Regarding the methodology and potential pitfalls of *jnana* he noted:

Jnana Yoga is communion with God by means of knowledge.²

Hearing, inquiry, and meditation. That Brahman is real and the world is unreal, is first to be heard. Then comes inquiry; for the truth of what is heard is firmly established by reasoning. The next step is meditation; that is, withdrawing the mind from the world and concentrating it on Brahman, the Real. This is the order of Vedantic discipline. If, on the other hand, the Truth is heard and understood intellectually but no attempt is made to renounce the unreal, of what use is that knowledge? Such knowledge ... does not help one to attain the Truth (227).

Jnana Yoga is exceedingly difficult in this age. ... Now the conclusion that the Jnani must come to is: 'I am not the body, I am one with the Universal Soul, the Absolute and Unconditioned Being.' 'As I am not the body, I am not subject to the conditions of the body, such as hunger, thirst, birth, death, disease and the rest.' One [who is] subject to these conditions and yet calling oneself a Jnani, is like a person who is suffering from intense pain caused by a thorn that has run into his hand and who nevertheless says, 'Why my hand is not at all scratched or torn. It is alright.' This kind of talk will not do. First of all the 'thorn' of body-consciousness has to be burnt into ashes by the fire of *Jnana* (228).

Very few persons are fit for the attainment of *Jnana* (*ibid.*).

The *Jnana* Yogi says, 'I am He.' But as long as one has the idea of the Self as body, this egotism is injurious. It does not help one's progress, and it brings about one's ruin. Such a person deceives himself and others (229).

Elsewhere Sri Ramakrishna posited that contemplative reasoning, integral to jnana, is of two kinds: *anuloma* and *viloma*. The process of *anuloma* projects awareness from the phenomenal to the noumenal, from the effect to the first Cause. The course of *viloma* then follows, and the seeker begins to see divine manifestation in every process or phenomena in Creation. *Anuloma* is involved with analysis, *viloma* with synthesis. Here Sri Ramakrishna's epistemology allows for the reintegration of the world into the Real, after realization. Sri Ramakrishna, however, did not conflate the methods of jnana and bhakti because he had explored both to their furthest reaches. As he consistently explained, the methods of jnana are distinct from bhakti; they do not need to be sequential or synchronous. They are divergent roads that, properly followed, lead to the same destination. We have already seen his caveats regarding the improper engagement with jnana. What is even more emphatic in his teachings is the proper approach to bhakti. To him, bhakti was not a technique but a tremendous energy, a force that could dissolve the boundary between the temporal and the timeless: 'It may be that one does not know the right path and yet has Bhakti for God, the intense desire to know Him. Such a devotee gains Him through the sheer force of that Bhakti.' 'Devotion effloresces into right discrimination, renunciation, love of all creatures, service to pious men ... singing the praises of the Lord, truthfulness and other virtues' (235).

He never veered from his conviction that there can be no delay in a person's realization when he exhibits these signs of the flowering of devotion.

Bhakti Movements

The tradition of the Tamil Shaivite and Vaishnavite mystics, known as the Nayanmars

and Alvars respectively, who flourished in the early centuries of the Common Era, played a very important role in the historical development of bhakti. Challenging an emphasis on complex ritualism for material purposes, and the varna-based exclusivism that it entailed, these early bhaktas opened the doors of divine experience to everyone, regardless of jati, varna, or gender. They also expressed the poetry of immersion in divine consciousness in the Tamil vernacular, thereby making transcendent mysteries accessible to the hearts and minds of common people.

But as doctrinally systematic bhakti-based *sampradayas* arose during the early medieval era, the highlight on intense love and longing began to be displaced by an emphasis on propitiation and submission, and fervent poetry gave way to ceremonial ritual. During the medieval period the bhakti of the Nayanmars and Alvars, the bhakti of ecstasy and intimacy, began to resurface—this time in North India. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries bhakti as a spontaneous movement spread through central and northern India, and diverse saints and mystics created their own unique expressions of devotional love outside institutional affiliations as well as beyond the structures of existing *sampradayas*. This movement included well-known bhaktas such as Janabai (c.14th cent.), Narasimha Mehta (c.1414–80), Surdas (c.1483–c.1563), Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1485–1533), Mirabai (c.1498–c.1547), Tulsidas (1532–1623), and many others who experienced bhakti as an intense divinely inspired emotion that could melt away the mist between self and God.

Over the centuries new bhakti lineages centred on the teachings of some of these medieval saints became themselves embedded in the complexities of ritualistic offerings, ceremonial community worship, and liturgies of praise, often offered in the mode of the *dasa*, servant of God.

This was and continues to be very helpful and necessary for many, and Sri Ramakrishna himself advocated the worship mode of the *dasa* for those afflicted by strong egotism.

Nevertheless, the concretization and conventionalization of worship that once again occurred could not easily catalyze, for the earnest devotee, the leap from veneration to true communion and, ultimately, to union. The reason for this is the inconvenient fact that the transformative encounter that is intimate communion with the Divine occurs in solitude and spontaneity. This solitariness of initial revelatory experiences is evidenced by the life of every major yogi, saint, or prophet in history. The systematization of worship, the crystallization of ritual, the institutionalization of bhakti are all very beneficial for the beginner; for those who struggle on the path or those who are content to be nurtured by a community and comforted by the dependability of a structured practice. For those who seek the Divine with the intensity of a Mirabai or a

Sri Ramakrishna the path must move from the structured to the spontaneous. It must evolve from the world of devotional liturgy to the wilderness of intense longing.

Sri Ramakrishna's Bhakti

Sri Ramakrishna, in the tradition of the early bhaktas, transported bhakti from the boundaries of community-based devotionism, ritual, and veneration—all of which maintain a distance between self and God—to the freedom of an inner sanctuary where love takes hold and burns away the curtain that separates the human and the divine.

Rather than *dasa-bhava*, the mood of the servant, he personally embodied *santana-bhava*, the mood of a child of God. Sri Ramakrishna always stressed the necessity for utter commitment on the path of true bhakti. Ever a pragmatist, he was under no illusions about the suitability even of bhakti—at least the kind of bhakti he advocated and embodied—for average householders operating under many constraints. His approach was nuanced. While he did offer simpler methods of relationship to God for most householders, he would not dilute his teachings in regard to the requirements of sadhana on the furthest reaches of the devotional path. At the same time, he made it clear that bhakti was the path most resonant with human nature because it simply demanded devotion, something many are capable of. In return, the force of loving God and the reciprocal grace that ensued would dissolve the deluding power of unrestrained passions.

It is a rare thing—this love of God. Bhakti can arise only when there is whole-hearted devotion to God. ... Pure Bhakti is very difficult to obtain. Through Bhakti, the mind and soul must be absorbed in God (230).

When Sri Ramakrishna sings, 'Mother, make me mad with thy love,' he means, 'Unify my desires; fuse all my longings into a powerful river of love for you alone.' Reason cannot unify consciousness, but love can; and when your whole being is unified like this, the intellect becomes razor-sharp and great creativity is released. It shines through every page of the Gospel: the beauty of Sri Ramakrishna's similes, the poetry of his stories, the penetrating psychology of his insights, and the touches of humor that come to this illiterate villager are marks of the highest genius. So he adds 'What need have I of knowledge or reason?' When you have pure love, everything else is added.

—Eknath Easwaran

A Tribute to Sri Ramakrishna, 12–13

It is given to pure souls alone, uncontaminated by the world, to love God and to have a single aim, namely, to have the mind fixed wholly upon the Lord (ibid.).

Is it possible to realize God unless one's passions have already been controlled? In a sense not. But that is true only of Jnana Yoga, the path of Knowledge. The knowing one says, 'One must first be pure if one wants to see God. One must first control one's passions. First self-discipline, then knowledge of God.' There is, however, another path leading to God—the path of devotion (Bhakti Yoga). If once man gains love of God, if once the chanting of His holy 'name' begins to thrill the devotee with joy, what effort is needed for the control of the passions afterwards? The control comes of itself. ... One absorbed in the love of God cannot think of sense-pleasures (230–1).

Although Sri Ramakrishna practised various sadhanas, including tantric, Advaita Vedantic, *sakhya-bhava*, *vatsalya-bhava*, and more, he is best known for his conviction that there is no simpler and more natural way to relate to God than as a child to its divine parent. Just as a child who loves his earthly mother would be unwilling to engage in actions that would cause her sorrow, the bhakta in the mood of a child of God finds that the temptations of worldly pleasure cannot compare with the love and grace that he or she experiences in the familiarity of divine intimacy. For this, a profound sense of closeness and relationship are required. In response to a disciple, who asked him how to eradicate the craving for worldly pleasure, he said:

Pray to the Divine Mother with a longing heart. Her vision dries up all craving for the world and completely destroys all attachment. ... It happens instantly if you think of Her as your own mother. She is by no means a godmother. She is your own mother. With a yearning heart persist

in your demands of Her. The child holds to the skirt of its mother and begs a penny of her to buy a kite. ... It begins to cry and will not give up his demand. ...

You too must force your demand on the Divine Mother. She will come to you without fail.³

Sri Ramakrishna consistently emphasized the need for this attitude of familiarity with God. When a group of people approached him and proclaimed that God is compassionate, he inquired as to why we should consider our divine parent compassionate when we feel cared for, since we do not view our earthly father or mother as compassionate when they look after us. He warned against too much praise and reflection on divine greatness, glory, and majesty, as that would create a distance from God.

The two pillars of Sri Ramakrishna's praxis, the mood of a child of God and the perception of God as the Mother, are not in themselves new principles in the history of bhakti. The Bengali bhakti poet saint Ramprasad preceded and inspired Sri Ramakrishna in his devotion for Ma Kali. It is Sri Ramakrishna's application of his sadhana to his perception of the world that made him unique. Although he never systematized his theology, he was a constructive theologian, in the sense that he reinterpreted not only the path to liberation through his direct knowledge of the Divine but re-envisioned the meaning of the world itself.

He had as his *ishta devata*, Chosen Deity, the Mother of the universe, allowing for a unique understanding of the world based on his special perception of the divine feminine that—as both Mahadevi and Mahamaya—is simultaneously creatrix and creation, deliverance and delusion. To him, the world was unreal when seen with unawakened eyes; when beheld by the eye of realization, it was a dazzling manifestation of the Divine itself:


The Lord ... thoroughly delights in the earthly play of space and time, even through this relatively unrefined body and mind. Divine Reality actually gives birth ... and enjoys the process of suckling its young.⁴

To supreme knowledge, or *brahmajnana*, the physical universe and the non-physical realms are revealed as Pure Consciousness. The entire cosmic drama continues to manifest, coherently and lawfully, but is simply *akhandā satchidananda*, indivisible Reality-Consciousness-Bliss (175).

The genius of Sri Ramakrishna is not limited to the liberation of bhakti from the strictures of submission and veneration. He employed the communion offered by bhakti in a new way. He did not negate the value of worship for the beginner on the path, and at the same time he did not view worship as an end in itself but as the first step on the devotional journey to utter transcendence. He showed us, through his living example, how the explosive love and yearning that an ardent bhakta experiences shatters the wall between the human and the divine, so that we can awaken to touch the face of transcendence and know it to be our own.

Ever practical, he advised householders who were too attached to loved ones to be able to take their minds off the object of their affection and

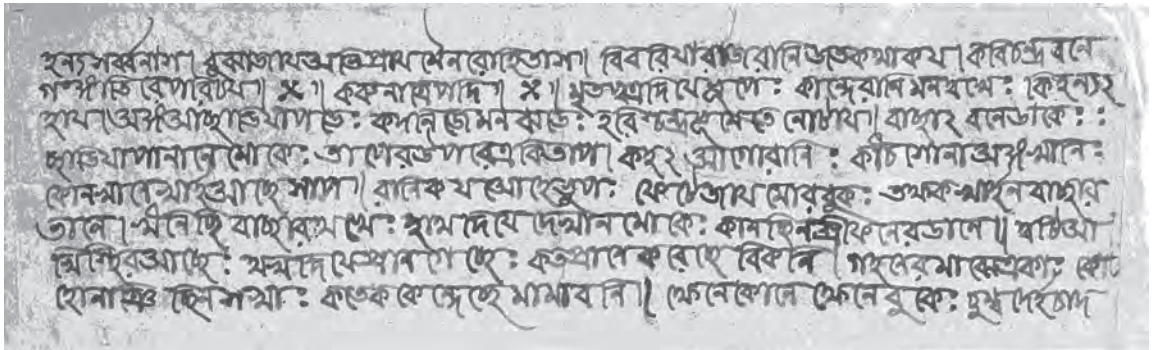
turn it towards God, that they should bestow that love as if they were offering it to God. In this way they would become aware of the Divine within the loved one, and every thought and act done for the object of love would be transformed into an offering to God. The insight that Sri Ramakrishna's experience offers us is that the power of love and relationality, available to all, can lead to Self-realization, where we awaken to see the Divine in the mirror of our own consciousness.

Yet, even if we experience the deepest samadhi, we can still enjoy the intimacy of relational love between self and God. It does not have to disappear. Rather, the taste of *bhakti-rasa* continues to be available to us. His subtle reinterpretation of bhakti is not often acknowledged, but is of critical significance at this time when a hyper-complex world needs a truly simple and natural path to intimacy with our Source. 

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Handwritten punthi, 'Haris Chandrer Pala', p. 38 (sheet 19);
signed by Sri Gadadhar Chattopadhyay, Kamarpukur, 20 Vaisakha 1255 BE



The Practice of Modern Yoga: Sri Ramakrishna's Four Contributions

Dr Christopher Key Chapple

FOR MORE THAN one hundred and fifty years yoga has exerted influence on the lives of many Americans. This article will explore the intellectual history that gave rise to a sustained interest in the theory and practice of yoga. It will then discuss four aspects of yoga as found in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna that hold particular poignancy in the American context: his emergence from states of darkness, his deconstruction of fixed gender roles, his embrace of religious pluralism, and the excitement generated by his moments of spiritual insight and freedom.

Yoga in the US: A Brief Intellectual History

As the United States recovered from the trauma of civil war in the latter part of the nineteenth century, three movements were on the rise: Transcendentalism, New Thought, and Pentecostalism. Each in their own way contributed to a receptivity for the teachings of Vedanta and, eventually, the practice of yoga. The first two movements arose in Boston and New York, while the third had its genesis in Los Angeles.

Transcendentalism had its inception with the life and writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Henry Alcott, and others in the years during and after the American Civil War. Emerson and Thoreau, who had both protested gov-

ernmental draft policies during the civil war and also supported the abolition of slavery, pioneered a free thought movement that took into account the many translations of Asian classics that had recently been published. This movement planted the seeds for and inspired the American insistence on direct spiritual experience, social change, and the importance of developing meaning in one's personal life. Nearly every schoolchild in the US reads the famous Transcendentalist literature, either in the form of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and *Little Men*, or in Henry David Thoreau's essays 'Walden' and 'Civil Disobedience', or in the poetry of Walt Whitman.

The New Thought movement was originated by Phineas P Quimby, the teacher of Mary Baker Eddy. His ideas gave rise to both the Christian Science and Religious Science Church, noted for their well-known and almost Vedantic emphasis on the power of the mind in shaping human emplacement within the world.

The Pentecostal movement, founded in Los Angeles in 1906 by William Seymour, a black preacher from Louisiana, emphasized a direct relationship with a vibrant presence of the Holy Spirit, a movement that gave rise to the largely white Assemblies of God and the black Church of God in Christ. Deeply emotional and in many ways shamanistic, these churches emphasize the personal saving power of moments of conversion, characterized by speaking in tongues and swooning, a religious-induced form of trance and loss of consciousness.

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All three movements share a common concern: how to find meaning in human life through an encounter with an experience of transcendence. They reflect an ongoing American tradition of pragmatism tinged with optimism, perhaps best described in William James's classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James may be regarded as the intellectual heir to the Transcendentalists who set the stage for Alfred North Whitehead's even more fully developed and clearly articulated Process Philosophy. Unlike Friedrich Nietzsche, whose critique of Christianity helped further entrench the secularism that continues to pervade the European subcontinent, James affirmed the very premises of religious experience. In his definition of conversion, he lauds the pioneers of the inner landscape who, through their willingness to encounter the darkness of the human soul, gave birth to new religious forms and insights. St John of the Cross, the Quaker founder George Fox, and the poet Walt Whitman inspired James to set forth to his readers the value of the search for meaning. Far from calling people to follow the herd, as Nietzsche warned, James suggests that religion brings an individual to a sense of purpose, resulting in a renewed commitment to moral actions, steeped in personal commitment, and not to outward conformity to rules.

A few short years after Swami Vivekananda's 1893 appearance at the Parliament of the World's Religions, James writes that 'In India, training in mystical insight has been known from time immemorial under the name of yoga.'¹ He quotes Swami Vivekananda's classic work *Raja Yoga* to define the culminating state of yoga: 'There is no feeling of *I*, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves—for Samadhi lies potential in us all—for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite' (315). For

free-thinking Americans, James articulated and validated the personal spiritual quest linked to the practice of yoga.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the *Autobiography of a Yogi* was published, and Paramahansa Yogananda built a significant number of centres in Southern California and developed extensive outreach for teaching yoga by correspondence. He developed a style of communicating yoga to Americans that suggested that Jesus is the *ishta devata*, Chosen Deity, or avatara for the West.

The Vedanta societies belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission, with branches throughout the United States—particularly in New York, Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Hollywood, and Portland—helped distribute literature and provide centres for knowledge about Vedanta and its applications through yoga. As noted below, the prodigious writings of Christopher Isherwood in partnership with Swami Prabhavananda helped greatly popularize the philosophies of India throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Yoga got perhaps its biggest boost in the United States with the passage of a landmark immigration legislation in 1965, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. Starting in 1880, and more forcefully from 1920, non-Europeans were barred from entering and settling in the United States. The exception were Japanese nationals, whose country had never been subjected to European colonization, occasional Punjabi farm workers on special permits, and Filipino males, whose nation had been captured by the US from Spain in the war of 1898 and who were allowed to work in the US until a process granting independence was begun in 1936 and each visiting farm worker was given a one-way ticket home. In the 1940s hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans were incarcerated in remote camps, resulting in a severe economic setback for families

who lost their businesses, homes, and farmlands. To redress various aspects of racial discrimination, each nation throughout the world was granted an immigration quota in 1965, beginning a near half-century of influx to the US of some of the best minds of Asia, as well as the immigration of many prominent teachers of yoga. This coincided with the rise of the 1960s counter-culture, setting the foundation for a major cultural shift in the US.

Disciples of Swami Shivananda, such as Swamis Vishnudevananda and Satchidananda, set up yoga centres throughout the country. The Bengali Vaishnava leader A C Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada established centres for the worship of Krishna. The Punjabi Sikh Yogi Bhajan founded Kundalini Yoga centres nationwide. In the 1970s disciples of Krishnamacharya began to teach various forms of yoga as learned in Mysore. Today countless yoga centres thrive throughout North America. An estimated twenty million individuals in the US practise yoga on a regular basis, and the 'yoga industry' generates billions of business dollars each year.

Rather than cleaving to its origins in Hinduism and Vedanta, most forms of yoga in the US seek to emphasize movement of the body and control of the mind through meditation, with reduced emphasis on particular religious teachings. Called 'modern postural yoga' (MPY) by Cambridge University scholar Elizabeth de Michelis, it provides a non-religiously identifiable spiritual respite from the toils and troubles of modern daily life. She writes: 'The lack of pressure to commit to any one teaching or practice, the cultivation of "Self" and of privatized forms of religiosity make MPY highly suitable to the demands of contemporary developed societies'², and this offers 'some solace, physical, psychological, or spiritual in a world where solace and reassurance are sometimes elusive' (ibid.). Sarah Powers, Joseph Alter, and others have documented the

rise of this new approach to the physical aspects of yoga. Mark Singleton's book *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2010) traces the interactions in India between British notions of physical culture and the development of new expressions of hatha yoga, particularly at the Jaganmohan Palace in Mysore under the sponsorship of Maharaja Krishnarajendra Wodeyar in the early twentieth century.

The world of yoga in twenty-first-century North America could not have been imagined even fifty years ago. Yoga studios can be found in abundance in every city and in many small towns. Part of this can be attributed to an ongoing concern with physical health, fitness, and vanity. Nevertheless, beyond the physical presence of yoga, assumptions about the nature of reality have been changing due to many social trends and movements, and many yoga practitioners are delving into the spiritual aspects of the practice through philosophical study, chanting, and singing kirtan.

While Sri Ramakrishna did not involve himself in any demonstrable way with the rigours of hatha yoga and *pranayama* practised at most modern yoga studios, he nonetheless made a significant contribution to the embrace of yoga worldwide in the past half century. The life and thought of Sri Ramakrishna set forth four themes that have become particularly relevant to the practice of yoga in twenty-first-century America. These four themes are found in his periods of emotional darkness, his experiments with gender identity, his blueprint for the practice of religious tolerance, and his embodied example of spiritual attainment in samadhi.

Emotional Darkness

As has been articulated since the time of Buddha, suffering, *dubkha*, can spur an individual to embark upon the spiritual path. This may have

been the case with Sri Ramakrishna, who in the early years of his spiritual practice, *sadhana*, fell into states of extended despondency, spiritual yearning, and periods of what he himself characterized as 'madness'. Sri Ramakrishna went far beyond transcending these dark periods and was propelled into great ecstasies unimaginable by ordinary persons. However, his descriptions of his struggles in darkness may hold particular relevance for and speak to the condition of many segments of the present-day population that struggle with a lack of meaning and a general sense of helplessness in the face of seemingly impossible situations. Suffering exists both in the personal lives of individuals and on a global scale, as seen in seemingly endless and often meaningless warfare and instances of ecological degradation. Acknowledging the role of suffering in the process of spiritual maturation gives voice to the significance of personal struggle. William James documented numerous instances of how the 'sick soul' breaks through the darkness to experience what George Fox described as the 'Ocean of Light' that provides respite, solace, and meaning.

Many people in the US suffer from a general sense of malaise. There are several sources for this anxiety, including unstable family structures, worries about economic security, and a sense of not measuring up to the images of beauty and status promoted by an all-pervasive media and marketing machine. Before the advent of radio, television, and Internet media, and before the growth of megacities, entertainment consisted of active participation in local theatre and musical groups, often supported by church communities, as well as through a greater emphasis on family life. Work often centred on small family enterprises, usually farms, until the middle of the twentieth century. As people flocked to the cities and suburbs with the rise of industrialization, a sense of isolation and depersonalization

arose. The individual became estranged from food sources and nature herself. This development has been further exacerbated with falling rates of religious and social engagement through participation in fraternal societies, bridge and bowling clubs, and the like in the past three decades. The optimism of the New Thought movement, though it did not totally vanish, became eclipsed by the burdens of modern life. The fastest growing churches are now to be found in the Pentecostal movement, which provides a sense of community even in the midst of mega churches, whose membership can number in the thousands within a single congregation. These churches continue to emphasize an ecstatic personal relationship with God and involve their members in singing, social activities, and service projects.

Not all Americans, however, while remaining spiritually inclined, choose to align themselves with churches. Yoga presents an important option for these individuals. Regular attendance at a yoga class fosters a sense of community without requiring a fixed set of beliefs or adherence to a unitary code of behaviour. Yoga movements and meditations, supplemented with an occasional session of call-and-response singing, bring the practitioner into direct contact with his or her body and allow one to feel creative and 'real', rather than a passive recipient of pre-packaged media entertainment. Yoga's emphasis on gentle movements holds appeal for an aging population, while its more rigorous forms present an athletic challenge for those who seek to find their 'edge'.

For individuals who have fallen into the darkness of substance abuse, yoga facilitates a reconnection with one's body and mind. And for many, yoga becomes an important component of recovery. Carl Jung, a scholar and student of yoga, and William James, whose work is mentioned above, both inspired Bill Wilson and Dr Bob Smith, who established Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935.



This movement has grown to include more than a hundred thousand groups worldwide. It encourages honesty and constant introspection, not unlike the application of the self-regulating ethics of yoga—which suggest the cultivation of non-violence, honesty, restraint from stealing, bodily restraint, and renunciation of excessive material attachments for the purpose of self-improvement. Just as Sri Ramakrishna struggled to overcome his periods of darkness and appealed to a higher force for deliverance, so also the addict first acknowledges a need for help and then discovers a faith in something higher than oneself to enter into the path of recovery.

As Sri Ramakrishna overcame his periods of darkness through the light of religion, similarly many individuals in the modern world find in yoga a respite from a life without meaning and a community of like-minded people.

Deconstruction of Gender Identity

Sri Ramakrishna engaged issues of gender identity with abandon and bravery, decades before a discourse exploring these possibilities emerged in

Western culture. In order to better worship Lord Krishna, he took on the garb and manner of a woman. Though cross-dressing has been known throughout history in various cultures, Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana gives room and voice to the freedom that comes from breaking free of prescribed gender roles. Swami Nikhilananda writes:

While practising the discipline of the madhur bhava [adopting the affect of romantic love], the male devotee often regards himself as a woman, in order to develop the most intense form of love for Sri Krishna, the only purusha, or man, in the universe. This assumption of the attitude of the opposite sex has a deep psychological significance. ... If he can inoculate himself thoroughly with the idea that he is a woman, he can get rid of the desires peculiar to his male body. Again, the idea that he is a woman may in turn be made to give way to another higher idea, namely, that he is neither man nor woman, but the Impersonal Spirit. The Impersonal Spirit alone can enjoy real communion with the Impersonal God. Hence the highest realization of the Vaishnava draws close to the transcendental experience of the Vedantist.³

In addition to taking on the mood of a lover of the male god, Sri Ramakrishna also from time to time took on the demeanour of the mother of God, particularly towards Lord Ramlala, as noted by Swami Nikhilananda: 'While worshipping Ramlala as the Divine Child, Sri Ramakrishna's heart became filled with motherly tenderness, and he began to regard himself as a woman. His speech and gestures changed. He began to move freely with the ladies of Mathur's family, who now looked upon him as one of their own sex. During this time he worshipped the Divine Mother as Her companion or handmaid' (24–5).

This behaviour in many ways validates the fluidity of roles and gender identities, which for certain audiences in the US can be both frightening and liberating. By challenging the hegemony of machismo, Sri Ramakrishna demands by his very presence an openness of mind. Ultimately, his example requires going beyond all gen-

der identity and the transcendence of all sexual urges. For some individuals, even to read about a willingness to experiment with gender identity for the sake of spiritual advancement presents a refreshing perspective.

On several occasions I have assigned Christopher Isherwood's *My Guru and His Disciple* to my university classes. This narrative includes the author's own struggle to overcome homoerotic urges. Reflecting a general acceptance of gender ambiguity, his guru Swami Prabhavananda quietly advised him to see the face of God in the object(s) of his affection. This advice, given at a time when homosexuals were arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to harsh treatments, including electric shock therapy, came as great solace to Isherwood. His friend and neighbour UCLA psychologist Dr Evelyn Hooker, inspired in part by Isherwood's honesty and fine human qualities, undertook a path-breaking study proving that homosexuals were often mentally well-adjusted and productive members of society. Her research eventually resulted in the declassification of homosexuality as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association in 1974 and the decriminalization of homosexual acts in most states in the US—and most recently in the Indian capital territory as well.

Classical India has long accepted the notion of a 'third sex', *napumsaka*, and has tolerated the existence of non-standard gender identity communities, the *hijra*. A small but not insignificant community of Vedanta and yoga practitioners in the US have taken inspiration from Christopher Isherwood. More than one student has confided in me the relief they have felt when they discovered a model for spirituality that did not condemn their sexual orientation. As a professor, however, it is my duty to remind them that true spirituality lies beyond all identities.

Viveka and Vairagya—Viveka means the sifting of the real from the unreal; and Vairagya, indifference to the objects of the world. They do not come all on a sudden; they have to be practised daily. 'Woman and gold' have to be renounced, first mentally, and God willing, they should be renounced afterwards both internally and externally. It is said in the Gita that by Abhyasa Yoga (continuous practice of meditation) dislike for 'woman and gold' is engendered. Continuous practice brings to the mind extraordinary power; then one feels no difficulty in subjugating the senses, passions and lust. It is like a tortoise that never stretches out its limbs, once it has drawn them in. Even if you cut it to pieces, it would never stretch them out.

—Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna, 167–8

Blueprint for Tolerance

Sri Ramakrishna famously worshipped God in many forms and in many garbs. He experienced what it means to worship God as a woman and as a mother, as we have seen above. He experienced total immersion into the consciousness of God. He worshipped God as would a Christian, a Muslim, and a tantric. He set forth a blueprint for tolerance, a desire to understand the views and perspectives of those held by members of other faiths.

Since the changes to the immigration law in 1965, religious diversity has arrived throughout all corners of the US.⁴ With the model set forth by Sri Ramakrishna and proclaimed by Swami Vivekananda at the 1893 parliament for the world's religions, we are well equipped for the realities of religious pluralism in today's America. Aided by the guarantees of religious freedom set forth in the United States Constitution, the pluralism celebrated by the parliament has become a reality.

Due to his innate curiosity and undying quest to see God in all possible forms, Sri Ramakrishna spoke of the Supreme Being as the inactive Purusha or Brahman, as the active Shakti or Maya or Prakriti, and as both impersonal and personal. He worshipped God as the transcendent and as the Divine Mother. However, even this expansive view of God as taught in the traditions of Vedanta, yoga, and tantra could not contain Sri Ramakrishna's devotion. Swami Nikhilananda reports:

Toward the end of 1866 he began to practise the disciplines of Islam. Under the direction of his Mussalman guru he abandoned himself to his new sadhana. He dressed as a Mussalman and repeated the name of Allah. His prayers took the form of the Islamic devotions. He forgot the Hindu gods and goddesses—even Kali—and gave up visiting the temples. He took

up his residence outside the temple precincts. After three days he saw the vision of a radiant figure, perhaps Mohammed. This figure gently approached him and finally lost himself in Sri Ramakrishna. Thus he realized the Mussalman God (33–4).

This immersion into a faith significantly different from the faith of his birth demonstrates the fervour Sri Ramakrishna felt in his quest for God. Similarly, by extension, this aspect of his quest might give permission for Muslims to revisit the earlier practice of learning about how yoga might help one strengthen one's worship.⁵

Similarly, Christians might be fascinated with Sri Ramakrishna's embrace of the truths of Christianity, as summarized by Swami Nikhilananda:

Eight years later, some time in November 1874, Sri Ramakrishna was seized with an irresistible desire to learn the truth of the Christian religion. He began to listen to readings from the Bible. ... One day he was seated in the parlour of Jadu Mallick's garden house at Dakshineswar, when his eyes became fixed on a painting of the Madonna and Child. Intently watching it, he became gradually overwhelmed with divine emotion. The figures in the picture took on life, and the rays of light emanating from them entered his soul. ... And, breaking through the barriers of creed and religion, he entered a new realm of ecstasy. Christ possessed his soul. For three days he did not set foot in the Kali temple. On the fourth day ... he saw coming toward him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice rang out in the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's soul: 'Behold the Christ, who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world, who suffered a sea of anguish for love of men. It is He, the Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate.' The Son of Man embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and merged in him. Sri

Ramakrishna realized his identity with Christ, as he had already realized his identity with Kali, Rama, Hanuman, Radha, Krishna, Brahman, and Mohammed. ... Thus he experienced the truth that Christianity, too, was a path leading to God-Consciousness. Till the last moment of his life he believed that Christ was an Incarnation of God. But Christ, for him, was not the only Incarnation; there were others—Buddha, for instance, and Krishna.⁶

Many practitioners of yoga in the US come from a Christian heritage and accept the basic tenets of the faith. They try to abide by the Ten Commandments and the key teachings of the Sermon on the Mount: love your neighbour, practise forgiveness, and develop a social conscience. Sri Ramakrishna would undoubtedly embrace all these principles. It is important for many Christians, and Jews too, to maintain a sense of identity with their birth faith, and yoga does not interfere with this wish.

Another new development has emerged: Christian yoga, which seeks to minimize the Indian—Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jaina—origins of yoga. Christian forms of yoga practice are continuous in many ways with the Pentecostal commitment to a direct, personal, physical relationship with Jesus. Surya Namaskar, the twelve part movement in honour of the rising sun, has been re-themed by some Christians and newly described to follow the Lord's Prayer. Some, like Aseem Shukla of the Hindu American Foundation, are concerned and upset with this adoption.⁷ Given his own experience, Sri Ramakrishna would undoubtedly see no conflict between yoga practice and adherence to Christianity.

Like many Hindu households today—and many US households as well—Sri Ramakrishna adorned his surroundings with multiple images to remind him of the divine. He 'accepted the di-

vinity of Buddha' and 'showed great respect for the Tirthankaras, who founded Jainism, and for the ten Gurus of Sikhism. ... He kept in his room at Dakshineswar a small statue of Tirthankara Mahavira and a picture of Christ, before which incense was burnt morning and evening.'⁸ He considered all faiths to be complementary and suited to the different temperaments of their devotees. In this regard, he would be comfortable with the wide range of symbolism in use at modern yoga centres. Some centres will include a full altar with multiple images of Hindu deities and Christian saints. Others will use flowers and a lighted flame as a focus point. Other yoga studios might use no imagery at all, but emphasize clarity of intention through sparse yet beautiful decor.

Spiritual Attainment

Swami Nikhilananda writes: 'No doubt Sri Ramakrishna was a Hindu of the Hindus; yet his experiences transcended the limits of the dogmas and creeds of Hinduism' (viii). He himself experienced the full range of samadhi states as described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, the core text of yoga that is currently taught at hundreds of yoga centres throughout North America. He was also an accomplished adept of tantra, as taught by the mysterious woman in orange robes Bhairavi Brahmani. Sri Ramakrishna described in detail his experience of the chakras and the movement of kundalini:

He actually saw the Power, at first lying asleep at the bottom of the spinal column, then waking up and ascending along the mystic Sushumna canal and through its six centres, or lotuses, to the Sahasrara, the thousand-petalled lotus in the top of the head. He further saw that as the Kundalini went upward the different lotuses bloomed. And this phenomenon was accompanied by visions and trances. Later on he described to his disciples and devotees the various

movements of the Kundalini: the fishlike, birdlike, monkeylike, and so on (22).

Every practitioner of yoga in the US has heard about and perhaps some have experienced sensations associated with the chakras and the awakening of the kundalini. Some gurus in the US, particularly Swami Muktananda and his disciple Swami Chidvilasananda, have specialized in conveying Shaktipat to energize these centres within their followers.

Samadhi, mentioned above as the culmination of yoga practice, also figures prominently in Sri Ramakrishna's accounts of the spiritual quest. In his early years at Dakshineswar, he experienced loss of external consciousness in samadhi. Later, with guidance from his sannyasa guru Sri Totapuri, he came to master the accomplishment of samadhi. Sri Ramakrishna himself describes this event:

Nangta [Totapuri] began to teach me the various conclusions of the Advaita Vedanta and asked me to withdraw the mind completely from all objects and dive deep into the Atman. But in spite of all my attempts I could not altogether cross the realm of name and form and bring my mind to the unconditioned state. I had no difficulty in taking the mind from all the objects of the world. But the radiant and too familiar figure of the Blissful Mother, the Embodiment of the essence of Pure Consciousness, appeared before me as a living reality. Her bewitching smile prevented me from passing into the Great Beyond. Again and again I tried, but She stood in my way every time. In despair I said to Nangta: 'It is hopeless. I cannot raise my mind to the unconditioned state and come face to face with Atman.' He grew excited and sharply said: 'What? You can't do it? But you have to.' He cast his eyes around. Finding a piece of glass he took it up and stuck it between my eyebrows. 'Concentrate the mind on this

The Hindu Renaissance led in the nineteenth century to modern Reform Hinduism. In it appeared an uncouth, barely educated, childlike peasant boy from a poor village Brahmin family who finally, after some resistance, became a priest in a quite new temple in Calcutta. In time he began to show even the intelligentsia with a modern English upbringing that Hinduism was not dying out, that it was by no means finished. Rather, once again it could become an inexhaustible source of spiritual renewal. From his youth Ramakrishna, as his name now was, had had trance-like experiences and visions, the expression of an excessive longing and love of God. ...

Ramakrishna became convinced that all religions were true, even if they are not free from errors. Whether it is a primitive veneration of images which does not in fact venerate the image but the deity, or the contemplation of Brahman without images, which certainly represents a higher form of religion, they are all different ways to the one all-embracing deity. ... It should not be difficult even for Christians to recognize this extraordinary man as a saint of Hinduism and as an embodiment of a being mystically filled with the deity.

—Hans Küng,

*Tracing the Way: Spiritual Dimensions
of the World Religions*, 73–4

point!' he thundered. Then with stern determination I again sat to meditate. As soon as the gracious form of the Divine Mother appeared before me, I used my discrimination as a sword and with it clove Her in two. The last barrier fell. My spirit at once soared beyond the relative plane and I lost myself in samadhi (29).

Swami Nikhilananda comments on the enormity of this accomplishment:

Sri Ramakrishna remained completely absorbed


in samadhi for three days. 'Is it really true?' Totapuri cried out in astonishment. 'Is it possible that he has attained in a single day what it took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve? Great God! It is nothing short of a miracle!' With the help of Totapuri, Sri Ramakrishna's mind finally came down to the relative plane (ibid.).

Though Sri Ramakrishna could never be thought of as an ordinary person, he in fact was able to integrate experiences of great ecstasy into his daily life and to teach others about the various paths of yoga that he had experienced.

Sri Ramakrishna sets forth an approach to spiritual attainment that is utterly driven by a yearning to experience the transcendent in all possible forms. He became spiritual not due to a desire to please others, but was driven by an unrelenting quest for truth. He experienced both the bliss of losing his individual identity and the bliss of retaining his identity as a worshipper of the Divine Mother. He understood what it means to be utterly devoted to the worship of God as within Islamic practice, and he also experienced the message of God's love as set forth in Christianity. This vision of seeing God within all things extended even to the poorest of the poor. Sri Ramakrishna insisted that the hungry be fed while going on a pilgrimage to Varanasi, demonstrating a solidarity with others that laid the foundation for the important social activities taken up by the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement. Through his actions, Sri Ramakrishna taught that spirituality must not remain a private experience but must lead to positive action in the world.

Yoga practice has become an indelible part of American and global culture. It addresses the ills of the body. It helps calm the perturbations of the mind. It allows one to explore and discover pathways to spirituality. In some instances, it

can help the pious to be more effective in their devotions.

Sri Ramakrishna set forth a path of yoga through the example of his life, highlighting features of yoga that are both obvious and overlooked. As a human being, he overcame tremendous physical and emotional suffering in the process of his spiritual quest. His occasional unconventional behaviour has helped 'outsiders' worldwide gain self-acceptance and even validation of their 'difference'. His spiritual yearnings brought him to understand the profound truths in so many different religious traditions. His accomplishments in meditation have inspired practitioners of yoga worldwide to aspire to the heights of spirituality for more than a century. The example of Sri Ramakrishna remains relevant for yoga practitioners throughout the world, particularly in his call for tolerance, his willingness to act outside of conventional gender roles, and in the profound depths of his immersion into the purest form of consciousness. 

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Concourse of Religions



Sri Ramakrishna and Sanatana Dharma

Morari Bapu

IFIRST OFFER MY SALUTATIONS to the supreme Consciousness that is Sri Ramakrishna. I am recording my thoughts on the auspicious Phalaharini Kali Puja day, on which Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Mother Sarada as Devi Shodashi. We all know that whoever looks into a clean mirror finds himself or herself there. As far as I have been able to understand him, Sri Ramakrishna is the personification of a universal and natural childlike simplicity manifest on earth as an avatara. For this reason, whoever met him face to face found in him their own form as well as their own essence. Muslims met him and found Islam reflected in his being. Christians saw him, Buddhists saw him, Jains saw him—followers of all paths and spiritual traditions leading to the Supreme found in Sri Ramakrishna the practices of their respective faiths. This was because Sri Ramakrishna himself walked through all faiths. But the land and tradition in which this mirror has been made can justly be proud of it. Similarly, Sanatana Dharma, Eternal Religion, can be proud that a special divine manifestation in the form of Sri Ramakrishna—as a great devotee of the Divine Mother—took place in this tradition, in India, in the land where Bhagavan Krishna had declared, ‘I manifest myself in every age.’

Of course, such great souls cannot be limited to any single place or tradition—they belong to all and all belong to them. But we do see sev-

eral important principles of Sanatana Dharma naturally expressed in Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings: the doctrine of incarnation, reincarnation, worship of God in images, the authority of the Vedas, the Advaitic principles of Vedanta, the path leading to samadhi as delineated in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*, ethical principles like truth and ahimsa, and so on. While worshipping in images he would perceive the deity in its dual as well as non-dual aspects, both of which are part of the Vedic and Upanishadic tradition of Sanatana Dharma. In the dualist mode he would see the Divine Mother and burst into tears or merge into samadhi on hearing divine names like Govinda, Gopala, and Hari. He was also so attuned to the Advaitic truth that while offering food to the Divine Mother he would end up feeding himself. He probably felt his identity with the deity. In fact, we see this march towards the Advaita of the Upanishads in every aspect of his life.

I sing the story of Sri Rama, *Rama-katha*; so when I think of Sri Ramakrishna from that viewpoint, I am reminded of a portrait placed before us by Maharshi Vishwamitra:

*Dakshine lakshmano yasya
vame cha janakatmaja;
Purato marutir-yasya
tam vande raghunandanam.*

I salute the scion of the Raghus [Sri Rama] who has Lakshman to his right, the daughter of Janaka to his left, and Hanuman in front.

Keeping this image in the context of Sanatana Dharma, to which it belongs, we may say that Sri Ramakrishna has Swami Vivekananda per-

The author is a leading expounder of the *Ramcharit-manas*, widely known for his expositions on *Rama-katha*.

ennially on his right, *dakshina*, and to his left is seated the Divine Mother. And who is in front? It is the sadhaka with intense desire for truth and unflinching devotion. This eternal image of Santana Dharma from the age of Sri Rama is once again manifest in the avatara that is Sri Ramakrishna.

Ninefold Bhakti

The bhakti tradition of Sanatana Dharma also has the concept of offering oneself, *atma-nivedana*, as one of the nine aspects of bhakti:

*Shravanam kirtanam vishnroh
smaranam padasevanam;
Archanam vandanam dasyam
sakhyam atma-nivedanam.*

Hearing about Vishnu, singing about him, remembering him, serving him, worshipping him, saluting him, being his servant, being his friend, and surrendering oneself to him.

When Sri Ramakrishna would listen to the singing of *Hari-nama*, the divine name, he would be plunged into *bhava-samadhi*. In the divine mood he would call upon Mother—‘Ma, Ma’—and his lips would break forth in kirtan, in singing such songs as ‘Ami Durga, Durga, Durga Bole’ (I, Saying Durga, Durga, Durga). This is exactly the tradition of kirtan in the bhakti way of Sanatana Dharma. *Smarana*, remembrance, is an internal activity. It is very difficult to get a measure of it from Sri Ramakrishna’s life. But the way we see him sitting—lips slightly parted, teeth just showing, a picture of innocence—it gives the impression of one in deep remembrance, in deep meditation, lost in one’s Self, a seated image of the highest incarnation. This is an image very dear to me.

As pujari to the Divine Mother, Sri Ramakrishna served her in person. At the same time he was also the source of the inspiration—both

directly and indirectly—that led Swami Vivekananda to serve every being, down to the last person, the deprived, the neglected. This service manifest in Sri Ramakrishna is indeed a form of *pada-sevana* of Sanatana Dharma.

Archana, worship. As mentioned in the beginning, Sri Ramakrishna worshipped Sri Sarada Devi as Shodashi. Who can measure the depth of this most remarkable act of adoration? We normally worship deities in images. But here was worship of the Divine Mother in a living image—a supreme spiritual act that can bear no comparison with any form of worship anywhere.

Vandana, salutation and praise. Our Vedic tradition wants truth and noble ideas to reach us from all the ten directions. This was not merely a matter of talk for Sri Ramakrishna, he lived this ideal. He accepted the best precepts of all religions, and treading the paths of different faiths showed that the same supreme Truth can be reached through each of them. He had respect for all. And along with this there was a total absence of egoism. This is also a supreme sign of *dasya*, the attitude of the servant, as far

The body of Sri Ramakrishna is made up of the wonderful substance called ‘compassion’ that is available in God’s store. There was no material other than compassion in the person of Sri Ramakrishna, the all-compassionate. The Creator himself has manifested in the form of Sri Ramakrishna on the strength and ability of that compassion. Do you know why? For the salvation of despicable, untouchable, low-minded souls like you and me. The form of Sri Ramakrishna is that of the redeemer of the fallen, the refuge of the poor, and the friend of the meek.

—Akshaya Kumar Sen,
Sri Sri Ramakrishna Mahima, 153

as I understand it. Further, whoever met him also found in him the ideal of *maitri*, friendliness, as depicted in the Bhagavadgita and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*.

Atma-nivedana, total self-surrender, is marked by complete transparency of being. As I tell in my *Rama-katha*, when Bhagavan Shiva went for his marriage, he went naked. That is a time when society expects one to put on clothes. But the text is unambiguous in speaking of Shiva as '*nagana, jatila, bhayankara*; naked, with matted locks, fearsome'. On the other hand, when he sings to Parvati atop Mount Kailas, he is described as being dressed. Perhaps it is the natural trait of the followers of Shiva that one presents

oneself to society the way one actually is, while at the time of one's personal sadhana one must present oneself with divine sattvic decorum knowing oneself to be in the presence of Paramatman, the Divine. A similar natural decorum born of surrender to the Divine is also seen in the person of Swami Rama Tirtha trying to hold on to his clothes as they are swept away by the winds in the desolate jungles of Tehri Garhwal. He is a detached sannyasin, a detached ascetic; yet there is an inner glow manifest in such acts that highlights the ideal of *atma-nivedana* in Sanatana Dharma; and this ideal is also manifest in Sri Ramakrishna.

I also tell in the *Rama-katha* that every person has his or her personal likes. In the image of Sri Ramakrishna that I just mentioned I find manifest the ideal of all the four ashramas of Sanatana Dharma—Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa—as well as the eternal values of all faiths, values that are common to all religions once we leave aside the exclusivist knots.

I feel that this has been Sri Ramakrishna's special role. In him we see the flowering of many ideals, in the form of the truths of various faiths. He reached the pinnacle of spiritual life. We know that a peak can be climbed from different routes. Similarly, though Sri Ramakrishna was born in the Sanatana tradition, by traversing the ways of different faiths he reaffirmed the Vedic dictum: '*Ekam sad-vipra bahudha vadanti*; Truth is one, sages call it by different names.'

This is how I have tried to understand Sri Ramakrishna. As you go about remembering him and distributing the prasada of this remembrance on the occasion of his 175th birth anniversary, I pray to Sri Hanuman that this prasada provide inspiration and light. Once again I offer pranams to the supreme Consciousness that is Sri Ramakrishna.

PB



IMAGE: 'SWAN IN FALL SEASON REFLECTED', DAVID PAUL OHMER / FLICKR

Bhagavan Mahavira and Ramakrishna

Prof. Manjula Bordia

MOST RELIGIONS ARE but diverse means of reaching the same goal, and their cardinal principles are, in essence, the same; yet there are differences in approach and manifestations. It is instructive that many saints—separated though they were by not only huge spans of time but also in terms of social, cultural, and political milieu—arrived at much the same conclusions about spiritual and existential verities. A comparative study of Bhagavan Mahavira and Ramakrishna Paramahansa would amply illustrate this point. Moreover, such a study would not only be spiritually gratifying but would have historical, social, and religious relevance as well. It is also very educative to witness from close quarters two of the most iconic and influential spiritual and religious personalities that have walked the earth and to study their contributions in the development of our religious identity. Though separated in time by nearly 2,500 years, there is remarkable resonance in their teachings and beliefs. It would be simplistic however to club them in the same ideological framework, for corresponding to the changing times, religion and spirituality too has undergone major shifts.

Bhagavan Mahavira

Mahavira, an exponent of Jainism, was born in 599 BCE in the Kshatriyakunda village in present-day Bihar and was named Vardhamana. His father was the head of the Nata—or Jnatri—

clan. Even at a tender age he exhibited a virtuous nature and engaged himself in contemplation. Mahavira's parents were deeply influenced by the principles of Jainism propounded by earlier Tirthankaras. Mahavira imbibed the same religious spirit and soon began to distance himself from worldly matters. He gave up attachment to his parents and loved ones, including his wife and daughter, renounced the pleasures and luxuries of the palace, and also parted with the power and prestige that belong to ruling families.

At the age of thirty Mahavira renounced his family, gave up his worldly possessions, and spent the next twelve years as a wandering ascetic. During these years he spent most of his time meditating. He showed utmost regard for other living beings—humans, animals, and plants—and avoided harming them. He gave up all worldly possessions, including his clothes, and lived an extremely austere life. He exhibited exemplary control over his senses while undergoing long years of penance. He calmly bore unbearable hardships. He went without food for long periods. It is said that out of the 4,514 days of his tapasya, he fasted for 4,165 days. He became fearless by totally eradicating concern for his own life. His courage and resoluteness earned him the name 'Mahavira'. These were the golden years of his spiritual journey, at the end of which he achieved *kevala jnana*. He was now a person of infinite harmony, knowledge, and self-control. He had conquered the urge for food, thirst, and sleep.

Mahavira spent the next thirty years traveling all over North India and preaching to the people the eternal truths he had realized. His

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teachings aim at total freedom from the cycle of births—with its attendant pain, misery, and death—and achievement of the permanent blissful state that is one's true self. This is also known as nirvana, moksha, or liberation.

Mahavira preached that the three *ratnas*, treasures—*samyak darshana*, right faith, *samyak jnana*, right knowledge, and *samyak charitra*, right conduct—can help one attain liberation from karmic bonds. His simple teachings attracted people from different walks of life: rich and poor, men and women, even untouchables.

Mahavira found 'society corrupted by distorted concepts of dharma'. He saw that 'violence in the form of animal sacrifices had eclipsed the true spirit of yajna. Spiritual values had been supplanted by superstitions and lifeless rituals and dogmas. ... With his penetrating insight born of self-realization, Mahavira struck mercilessly at these perversions. He simplified religious procedures and concentrated on righteous conduct.' He also denounced caste exclusiveness.

'Mahavira's simple and convincing method of appealing to the highest and noblest impulses in the living breast soon won him a large following.' He was 'deeply conversant with the needs, capacities, and aptitudes of human beings and stressed a simple five-fold path' of ahimsa, non-injury; satya, abjuring falsehood while dealing with others; *asteya*, non-stealing; brahmacharya, abstaining from sexual pleasures; and *aparigraha*, non-acquisition of property. He propounded the basic principles of Jain dharma: the *anuvrata* for the laity and *mahavrata* for the monks, whereby the goal of human life can be reached. 'Monks and nuns adhere strictly to these vows, while the laity people observe them as best as they can.'

'These vows cannot be fully implemented without accepting the philosophy of non-absolutism—*anekantavada*—and the theory of relativity—*syadvada*, qualified predication'—

which are the other remarkable features of Jainism. '*Anekantavada* literally means a "doctrine of non-exclusivity or multiple viewpoints".' It is recognition of the relativity of truth in this world and teaches us to respect each other's beliefs and accept them as individually valid. Mahavira believed in spiritual pluralism. He preached: 'You may have differences with others on account of certain natural traits, outlook, or tastes. But you should cultivate forbearance and patience to enable you to make peace with every one, as, in reality, no one is absolutely different from you. No one is high or low on account of his birth.' Knowledge and truth being all encompassing and relative, all alternative formulations should always be considered while passing a judgement.

Syat suggests that truth reveals itself in a distinctive form when viewed from a particular standpoint. Viewed from other perspectives the same fact may appear to possess different attributes. Each perspective is right.

Mahavira's concept of ahimsa deals not only with causing harm to others but also, and primarily so, with avoidance of harming one's own self. Behaviour that inhibits the soul's ability to attain moksha is self-damaging; moreover, the tendency to harm others ultimately harms one's own self. The concept of ahimsa is extended to humans as well as to all animals, plants, micro-organisms, and even beings having life in potential form. 'All life is sacred and everyone has a right to live fearlessly to its maximum potential.' One should adhere to ahimsa not only in action but also in thought and speech.

Mahavira did not subscribe to the concept of God as creator, protector, and destroyer. He also did not encourage the worship of gods and goddesses as a means of salvation. 'He taught the idea of supremacy of human life and stressed the importance of a positive attitude towards life.' Mahavira forthrightly rejected the belief that

any Shastra is God's word. He said that knowledge is acquired only by one's own experience or through pure perception. There is no God distinct from our soul, which is capable of attaining to godhood by becoming free from all bondages of karma; this is the state of the Arihant, conqueror of all evils, or Arhat, a being worthy of veneration. Each human soul has the capacity to become perfect by manifesting its potentialities and destroying the effects of bad karma through renunciation and penance.

Mahavira explained that from eternity every living being is in the bondage of the karma accumulated by good or bad deeds done out of ignorance. 'Under the influence of karma the soul is habituated to seeking pleasures in materialistic belongings and possessions. This is the deep-rooted cause of self-centred violent thoughts, deeds, anger, hatred, greed, and such other vices.' *Karmavada*, the theory of karma, is a guiding philosophical principle of Jainism.

'In the matters of spiritual advancement, as envisioned by Mahavira, both men and women are on an equal footing. ... Many women followed Mahavira's path and renounced the world in search of ultimate happiness' and truth. 'Mahavira taught that men and women are spiritual equals and that both may renounce the world in search of moksha or ultimate happiness.'

'Jainism existed before Mahavira, and his teachings were based on those of his predecessors. Thus Mahavira was a reformer and propagator of an existing religion rather than the founder of a new faith. He followed the well-established creed of his predecessor Tirthankara Parshvanatha. However, he did reorganize the philosophical tenets of Jainism to correspond to his times.'

More than 2,500 years have passed since the Dipavali day in 527 BCE when it is believed that Mahavira gave up his body. But his philosophy and teachings are relevant even to this day in a

world plagued by corruption and violence.

Ramakrishna

If the world was blessed with the birth of Mahavira at a time of declining social and religious values, an analogous situation arose in nineteenth-century India. With the spread of British rule a good number of educated Indians had their religious and cultural moorings unfastened by an ambience where all religious beliefs and faiths were being challenged by new thoughts ushered from the West. People were further confused by the often-contradictory teachings of diverse religious groups—Hindus, Christians, Brahmos, and Arya Samajists, among others. The advent of Ramakrishna, the embodiment of a pristine form of the universal religion and the rejuvenation of the Vedanta philosophy, provided the bulwark that helped people navigate through the uncertain times of transition and turmoil.

Unlike several of the avatars of the Indian tradition, who were born in royal households or in dramatic circumstances, Ramakrishna was born on 18 February 1836 at Kamarpukur, a village of Bengal, in a simple and pious family of moderate means. The Puranas record the unique spiritual experiences and visions surrounding the advent of incarnations, and Ramakrishna's birth was no exception. His parents had several unusual experiences that assured them an auspicious divine presence would soon fill their lives with bliss.

Gadadhar, as the newborn was fondly named, soon captivated the hearts not only of his family but of all village people. His little acts appeared sweeter to them with passing time. As he grew up, he started going to school, but he was also a many-sided genius who loved sculpture, dramatics, music, and other arts.

Soon Gadadhar felt disinclined to formal schooling and spelt out forcefully that he was not interested in 'bread-winning education'.

Instead, he enjoyed being in the company of holy men and reading religious books and scriptures, stories about gods and goddesses. Coincidentally, Kamarpukur lay on the route to Puri; so it was a resting place for monks. At the local pilgrim house, where the monks rested, Gadadhar served them and, in all likelihood, heard from them Puranic stories, even as he would sing to them hymns and songs in praise of God. Religious men keenly aware of the transitory nature of the world and unattached to worldly life greatly influenced Gadadhar, who became dear to them. This kindled in him an intense devotion to God. It was due to the purity and guilelessness of his soul that at the tender age of seven he was overcome by the beauty of nature and experienced ecstatic trance. Such spells of spiritual ecstasy increased after the age of ten, when he would become oblivious of himself and his surroundings while meditating and experiencing divine visions.

The loss of his father when he was only seven affected Gadadhar both emotionally and spiritually. It was the first time he actually felt the transitoriness of life and grew more thoughtful and introvert. His elder brother Ramkumar, who had moved to Calcutta to make a living, was worried about Gadadhar's indifference to regular studies, and decided to take him along to Calcutta to assist him at his Sanskrit school. Gadadhar complied, for he greatly respected his brother.

It was a providential design that a prosperous, virtuous, and famous widow named Rani Rasmani, a great devotee of Goddess Kali, had built a temple to the Goddess at Dakshineswar and Ramkumar had agreed to officiate there as priest. Soon Ramakrishna started assisting him in this task and, after Ramkumar's death in 1856, he became the chief priest of the Kali temple.

Ramakrishna, however, was no ordinary priest. In Kali he saw the mother of the universe, a universal Consciousness that interpenetrated

all things. His mind was now eager to realize the mother of universe, see her face to face. He prayed and worshipped for days together. He cried and wept for hours to attain his spiritual goal. As the days went by his anguish to have her vision increased. This anguish grew to such an extent that once he even thought of putting an end to his life with the sword that was in the temple when, all of a sudden, he had the wonderful vision of the Mother Goddess and lost all outward consciousness in the blissful ecstatic experience.

Thereafter began an unfathomable and everlasting bond with the Mother Goddess. Ramakrishna now underwent a great change, which only a few people could truly understand. Others became apprehensive of his behaviour, for he appeared like a man possessed. Those who could see beyond the gross material world felt that the temple where Ramakrishna had the vision of Mother Kali was actually filled with an intense palpable divine presence. Ramakrishna, in turn, completely lost himself in adoration of the Goddess. He did what seemed to be the Divine Mother's will. It became his philosophy of life that if one has conviction, diligence, intense longing, and readiness to sacrifice worldly pleasures one would be graced with direct communion with the Goddess. But he also realized that very few have such anguish and longing for God.

Ramakrishna was not satisfied with a single ecstatic experience of being soaked in the Divine Mother's ever-flowing bliss and started undertaking further sadhana in all earnestness. This took its toll on his health. When he came to Kamarpukur, his mother Chandradevi was worried to see his indifference to worldly affairs, his introversion, and his frequent spells of anguish at being separated from the deity. In consultation with her son Rameshwar, Chandradevi decided to get Ramakrishna married without delay and thus bring his mind down to household affairs.

Ramakrishna did not object. On the contrary, he himself suggested the girl who he said was preordained for this purpose.

It has been suggested that Ramakrishna married only to set before society the ideal of the sanctity and purity of married life. He also wanted to advance the concept of the motherhood of God through his wife Sarada Devi, who survived him by thirty-four years. Ramakrishna not only demonstrated an extraordinary respect for women in general, but also invoked the power of the Divine Mother in Sarada Devi. He commissioned Sarada Devi to provide peace and solace to numerous suffering people. Sarada Devi, in turn, truly emerged as an embodiment of universal motherhood.

After his marriage, Ramakrishna returned to Dakshineswar only to plunge again into the stream of sadhana. Help came in the form of two beings who would instruct him in using the current to cross the stream. They were the Bhairavi Brahmani and the sannyasin Totapuri. Bhairavi Brahmani assured him that he had reached one of the highest states of sadhana and instructed him in tantra practices. Totapuri, a Vedantin, taught him Advaitic meditation, which culminates in *nirvikalpa samadhi*. Ramakrishna remained in *nirvikalpa samadhi* for six months at a stretch. This incredible absorption came to an end when he received a command from the Divine Mother to remain in *bhavamukha*, the threshold between the Absolute and the relative planes of existence, for the good of the world.

Having undergone arduous sadhana Ramakrishna firmly established that the true meaning of dharma could only be deciphered through absolute surrender at the feet of the Divine and by losing oneself in the bliss of Brahman, and not by mere ratiocination and logic. All worldly joys seem to be of no value when one attains this supreme bliss of the all-pervading Brahman. He

advocated self-sacrifice, ardent devotion, and renunciation of worldly temptations as prerequisites for reaching the Divine. He observed all moral injunctions and abstained from all temptations that were obstacles in the path of God-realization. He was so possessed by the urge for sadhana that he became completely oblivious of bodily requirements and fell ill frequently. Such sadhana purged his entire body and mind of all dross, leaving behind nothing but purity. He became the living embodiment of satya, ahimsa, brahmacharya, *asteya*, and *aparigraha*. His behaviour was characterized by utmost simplicity, and people always felt a flood of divine moods and a surge of devotional love in his company. Established as he was in complete renunciation, it was impossible for him to store up anything for the future. *Mati*, clay, and *taka*, money, had the same value for him. Such was his abstinence from unspiritual ways and habits that the very presence of evil thoughts or evil beings would generate reactions from him and make him uncomfortable.

Ramakrishna spoke in simple and rustic Bengali, far removed from scholarship and rhetoric. But when he spoke even the greatest of scholars and logicians were dumbfounded; rather, they were so swayed in the pure surge of divinity that they completely forgot themselves. His conversational style was lucid and would be interspersed with simple anecdotes, parables, and personal experiences that, though apparently very simple, pressed home the true essence of his harmonizing philosophy of universal brotherhood. His words were comparable to the words of the rishis of ancient times or seers like Buddha and Mahavira, who did not sermonize but expressed their thoughts through stories and anecdotes based on experiences. Ramakrishna had seen God face to face, talked and shared with the Divine. Thus, his sayings touched the souls of his listeners. This, combined with a jovial childlike

innocence, made him extremely lovable, not only to humans but also to God.

During Ramakrishna's time people were fighting to establish the supremacy of their own faiths. Ramakrishna's Vedantic knowledge and experiences showed that all religions converge on to one absolute universal Consciousness, whom we call God. He performed sadhana according to the tenets of all important religious denominations prevalent in India during his time. He walked through Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, tantric, Islamic, and Christian paths and was convinced that they all lead aspirants to the non-dual plane. The means and ways to experience that supreme state may be different, and human beings are free to choose whichever means they feel convinced is best suited to help them realize that Reality. But the goal, he reiterated, is the same. After attaining this state of universal Consciousness all the differences of religions pale into insignificance.

Without the realization of this divine Spirit in oneself and in others, true sympathy, true love, and true service are impossible. That is what Ramakrishna himself achieved and wished his disciples to realize. His practical concept of an all-embracing universal religion came as a panacea in times of religious conflicts. He never indulged in religious controversies, nor did he propound doctrines through arguments. Self-realization was the only means that he adopted. All that he spoke or taught was personally experienced, practised in his daily life, and then put forth to his disciples. He stressed that religion should not be merely confined to the textual knowledge of the Vedas, the Upanishads, or other scriptures, but ought to be realized through personal sadhana. He also believed that in order to understand the essence of the holy scriptures of one's religion one does not have to prove another religion inferior.

Philosophy in India is termed *darshana*, vision, because the philosophical truths are estab-

lished and propounded not merely on the basis of cold reason, but derived through intuition and the vision of seers and saints who experienced the truth through their communion with the ultimate Reality.

The message of harmony of religions has been widely recognized as Ramakrishna's greatest contribution to the modern world. Religions are not contradictory but complementary; the religious sphere is not one of uniformity but of unity in diversity, despite seemingly unbridgeable differences. Faith in any religion is better than having no faith at all, Ramakrishna affirmed. Pursuit of God or higher Consciousness is the ultimate goal of life.

Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886, leaving behind a team of devoted disciples headed by Swami Vivekananda and under the tutelage of Sarada Devi.

A Comparison

For Ramakrishna, only God was real, while the soul is the only conscious entity for Mahavira. Ramakrishna went to all the ancient and modern sources that could in any way aid him in a better understanding of God. Rituals and image worship were for him valuable aids in this process. Ramakrishna not only endorsed the reading of scriptural texts like the Vedas, he also had complete faith in them. He held them sacred and did not reject any of them; indeed, he was keen to absorb everything. Mahavira, on the other hand, vehemently rejected scriptural authority, including the views and beliefs propounded by the Vedas.

Mahavira's religion was guided by the pure rational principle of *karmavada*, law of karma. To him, there was no escape from the effects of one's karma. Hence, he firmly believed that renunciation and penance had to be practised to loosen the hold of karma, a process called *nirjara*. This was the only means to liberate human beings from

the bondage of birth and death. *Karmavada* is the fundamental tenet of Jainism. On the other hand, Ramakrishna was a man of faith; faith and devotion to God were for him fundamental elements governing higher spiritual development. When aspirants yearn for God with a heart overflowing with profound love, they are showered with divine grace that negates all evil karma.

But despite the differences in their times, upbringing, and paths of illumination we also find remarkable similarities in the thoughts and teachings of these teachers. Both Mahavira and Ramakrishna believed that negative forces like sensual desire, passion, greed, lust, and cruelty keep people on the lower planes of Creation. These are responsible for the human entrapment in the cycle of birth and death, and they must be fought and vanquished. Consequently, both of them warned people to be resolute against these destructive forces.

Mahavira and Ramakrishna taught no creed or dogma. Their only concern was human upliftment. Both believed that there is infinite moral and spiritual potential in humans. To develop that potential is the foremost duty in life. Both of them, at different times, revitalized religion, which had become fraught with excessive ritualism and superstition and helped it become better-equipped to respond to the challenges of immediate circumstances. Their lives are a testament to truth, universality, love, and purity. Ramakrishna was the greatest exponent of the Jain principles of *anekantavada* and *syadvada*. Such liberal exponents of spiritualism as Mahavira and Ramakrishna are indeed rare to come by.

Like Mahavira, Ramakrishna was also a proponent of ahimsa. He was terribly moved by the grief of creatures and had unconditional love for all human beings. This connected him with the masses in a unique bond and made him re-

markably approachable. Steeped in the spirit of Advaita he could actually feel even the physical pain others suffered.

Both Mahavira and Ramakrishna considered lust and greed as two major impediments in the way of attaining God; yet, they did not dissuade people from leading married lives. They suggested special means to attain higher consciousness while leading a family life. Ramakrishna considered every woman as the Divine Mother incarnate. Even after realizing the ultimate Reality, Brahman, he remained a child of Mother Bhavatarini. He honoured women through the concept of the motherhood of God.

While Mahavira laid infinite stress on human agency, Ramakrishna considered that God was the only Reality and humanity a mere reflection of this Reality. Yet, both dedicated their lives for the improvement and uplift of humanity. They selflessly endured great physical hardship to liberate humanity from superstition and orthodoxy. While one was God-intoxicated, the other was soul-intoxicated.

Mahavira and Ramakrishna made important contributions to human life and thought. Their sole purpose was improvement of the spiritual quality of life. In their diverse but unique ways, they aided the spiritual advancement of their fellow humans. They sacrificed normal human pleasures and comforts for greater good. Their remarkable insight and perception made them attain unimaginable spiritual heights, though their tremendous love for humanity always shone through.

This is a very rudimentary attempt to portray the lives, achievements, and teachings of two towering spiritual personalities. Mere words can, however, hardly suffice to do justice to the depth of their spiritual experiences and influence on humanity. There is too much that is left unwritten.



Coming for the Meditation but Staying for the Bowing

Rev. Heng Sure

BUDDHISM AND THE VEDANTA form of Hinduism have been present in California and drawing Western disciples for roughly the same period of time.¹ In that century bowing or the making of ritual prostrations, though a primary method of practice in Asia, has grown but little in popularity among Western devotees. The teachers who brought Vedanta and Buddhism to North America themselves practised bowing, which is clearly fundamental to the practice of both religions. At some point these two traditions encountered the resistance of many Westerners to the act of bowing. Can Westerners learn to bow? If so, it implies a larger question: will bhakti, the practice of devotion, find its way onto Western soil? An affirmative answer to these questions implies that both faiths, as they were and are practised in Asia, will plant deeper roots in Western soil. A negative answer means that we might have to expect a slower growth of both Hinduism and Buddhism, or perhaps the creation of a hybrid Western style of practice that is vast in insight and contemplation but limited in devotion. I offer this investigation as a means of opening the conversation, so that those concerned with understanding the heart of wisdom and compassion inherent in Buddhism and Hinduism may increase awareness of the elements of proper practice.

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The Appeal of Meditation

To begin with we can address the question, ‘Why do Westerners approach Eastern religions, and if they stay, what holds them?’ In the case of Mahayana Buddhism many individuals come for the meditation, but only a certain few stay for the bowing. For those who do continue to explore what Buddhism offers beyond meditation, the practice of devotion is one of the first methods that sustains the search for awakening and for liberation. I suggest that Buddhist devotion in general and the practice of bowing in particular can have an increasingly significant appeal to Westerners, provided it is understood in a Western context that is rational and psychologically sound. Though I am less qualified to propose developments in the Vedanta community, I offer this comparison in the hope of stimulating further exchange on the topic.

According to Carl T Jackson, Westerners come initially to Vedanta for a variety of reasons. Jackson cites a 1950s serial article called ‘What Vedanta Means to Me’ that ran in the journal *Vedanta and the West*. The series presented testimonials from a variety of Western practitioners of Vedanta.² In summary, the teachings of Vedanta appealed primarily for their perceived breadth and universalism, for their practical experiential approach, and for their modern reaffirmation that through spiritual practice one might come to know God. Many believed that Sri Ramakrishna had taken that journey and that the path was still open to all.

Jackson reports that the beneficial effect on the mind of Vedanta's meditation had a special attraction for Westerners. One practitioner testified that she had seen far more drastic and desirable personality changes through the practice of yogic meditation than she had through psychoanalysis (101).

Further, Vedanta offered the opportunity for a guru-disciple relationship, it helped eliminate previous negative stereotypes towards Eastern religions, and its books and printed materials proved the primary appeal in many cases. The Ramakrishna monks kept a low profile in the West, relying on word of mouth and publications rather than advertising and media publicity.

Jackson, in his analysis of the responses in 'What Vedanta Means to Me', raises questions that are not addressed in the surveys. For example, he says that while the swamis have introduced Hindu philosophy to Westerners, they have also introduced distinctive rituals and practices for devotees to adopt, but little has been said about those practices.

Several questions arise: What is the attitude of American followers toward image-worship and daily meditation? To what extent have rituals and ceremonies been modified to meet Western conditions? Much must be read between the lines because of the swamis' reticence about speaking publicly on such matters, but there is sufficient evidence to suggest that, for many Americans, Vedanta has been a matter of practice even more than of intellectual belief (103).

Certainly many of the reasons Jackson reports as Vedanta's primary appeal to Westerners could be cited, especially his last point, for Buddhism's popularity in the West as well. Buddhism's practices, particularly meditation, appeal strongly to Westerners. But making ritual prostrations, or

bowing to the Buddha, needs to be explained and made rational before it will hold the typical Western devotee's interest and sustain his or her deeper inquiry into the mind.

Many accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's personal practice noted that he bowed in respect to images, deities, and even devotees to express his inner humility and outer respect for the Divine in all beings. For example, he specified two bows to God per day as a minimum for spiritual practice.³

Since Buddhism and Hinduism have been good neighbours in the West for the first century of their development, we might contrast and compare the respective growth of teaching forms in the West. Jackson's statement infers not that Vedanta in the West lacked devotional practice and ritual, but that the swamis knowing the Western orientation towards rationality and scientific inquiry, in an act of *upāya*, skill in means, de-emphasized the bhakti aspects of spiritual practice when introducing Vedanta.

Scholar Judith Lief, writing about the act of making prostrations, suggests that the reasons why Westerners find bowing difficult are complex: 'As Westerners we tend to think of prostrating as a gesture of defeat or abasement. We think that to show someone else respect is to make ourselves less. Prostrating irritates our sense of democracy, that everyone is equal. ... On one hand we want to receive the teachings but on the other we don't really want to bow down to anyone or anything.'⁴

Eric Reinders gives another reason for a Western distaste for bowing. He laments the lack of research by Western scholars on Buddhist bowing and traces this to the European Protestant iconoclasts' aversion for physical gestures of deference, a hatred of religious hierarchy that led to the split with Rome.⁵ Reinders suggests that the Protestant struggle with

Roman Catholicism in Europe has been projected onto Asian religions. The sight of Buddhists, particularly Chinese Buddhists, bowing to Buddhas, to their teachers, and to each other stirs up their Protestant distaste for idolatry and for the inequality of institutionalized religious hierarchies.

One of the reasons for Buddhism's current rapid growth in the West is because meditation, as it is taught in many Buddhist communities, appears egalitarian and free of dogma; it makes no demands of faith or adherence to a creed. Bowing, on the other hand, by this same index, should not appeal, since it seems inherently unequal, undemocratic, humiliating, and submissive. Bowing takes one to the earth, it appears unsanitary and superstitious; it conjures up the taboos of idolatry and graven images. From a Gospel-based, logocentric perspective, bowing is mere ritual, not textual. It masks the real thing, the doctrine. Moreover, given cultural values of individualism and ethos of equality, bowing seems to replace self-determination with servility (*ibid.*).

Thus, taking into account what scholars perceive as deep-seated cultural biases against bowing and prostration, how might Buddhist practice transform that prejudice? First of all, Reinders makes the point that even within Christianity it is only northern European Protestant forms that find doctrinal problems with bowing. The world's other religious traditions, with few exceptions, value bowing as an effective spiritual practice. Judaism, Islam, and Eastern and Roman Catholicism, as well as Asian devotional traditions such as Hinduism and Brahmanism, include bowing in texts and liturgies. Indeed, one can find online and download for free a manual with detailed instructions on making devotions to Sri Ramakrishna!

Sri Ramakrishna on Bowing

In numerous places in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* we learn that Sri Ramakrishna practised bowing in respect and advised his disciples to do so. He often expediently got guests or non-Hindus to bow by paying respects to them first, thus making it awkward to refuse to return the courtesy. He advocated bowing as a method for transforming lust, for ridding oneself of ego, and as a way to express gratitude to the presence of God. He had a way of teaching bowing to beginners; he would bow to children, and his own practice of courtesy and modesty inspired his biographers to record his faultless etiquette in returning bows whenever someone bowed to him.

In India, however, Sri Ramakrishna introduced bowing to beginners with the understanding that this practice needed to be taught: 'As soon as he and his friends would arrive, I would salute them before they bowed to me. Thus they gradually learnt to salute a holy man, touching the ground with their foreheads.'⁶

In the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* we find him explaining how awakened souls continue to make prostrations even after their enlightenment: 'A perfect soul, even after attaining Knowledge, practises devotions or observes religious ceremonies to set an example to others. I go to the Kali temple and I bow before the holy pictures in my room; therefore others do the same. Further, if a man has become habituated to such ceremonies, he feels restless if he does not observe them' (543).

These examples show that Sri Ramakrishna placed a high value on the practice of bowing. By demonstrating that the yoga of bowing has profound effects on the mind, both of the practitioner and the observer, Sri Ramakrishna expands the function of bowing from its primarily exterior focus, devotion, to an interior psycho-

logical significance. In Buddhism we see the practice of bowing applied in ways that parallel and overlap with other traditions, yet a significant difference also emerges. In Buddhism the focus of bowing turns back to the mind of the bower. Bowing in Buddhism opens a path to samadhi and liberation instead of exclusively moving outwards towards a transcendent other.

Buddhism's approach to bowing invites the practitioner to contemplate the nature of his or her heart and mind. The myriad practices relate back to a central theme, the mind and its nature, which are fundamentally awakened and free from dualities. The 'goal' reached at the end of the spiritual path is to gradually remove all aspects of the view of self, until one rediscovers one's non-dual nature. As a road to the non-dual, bowing helps empty out and purify false concepts within. The false, illusory self can be erased as one bows. It is this psychological emphasis that opens a door to the acceptance of bowing by Buddhists in the West.

The Indian Roots of Chinese Buddhism's Practice of Bowing

The effectiveness of reverential bowing as a physical, mental, and spiritual yoga has ensured its place to this day as an important feature of Mahayana liturgy. In his *Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra*—*Dazhidulun* in Chinese—Nagarjuna says that there are three forms of worship. They are, in ascending degrees of respect, to bend the waist, to kneel, and finally to make a prostration. To place the head and face at the feet of the worshipped is to make a supreme offering.

The great Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang (596–664 CE) lists nine forms of respect that he had witnessed among the Indian Sangha: 'The first form is upon meeting, to inquire after another's well-being. The second, when passing on the path, is to nod the head to show respect. The

One day Girish Ghosh saluted the Master by raising his folded hands to his forehead. The Master immediately returned the salutation by bowing from the waist. Girish Babu saluted the Master again. The Master saluted Girish Babu with an even deeper bow. At last, when Girish Babu prostrated flat on the ground before him, the Master blessed him. Later Girish Babu would say: 'This time the Lord has come to conquer the world through prostrations. In his incarnation as Krishna it was the flute; as Chaitanya, the Name. But the weapon of his powerful Incarnation this time is the salutation.' The Master used to say: 'Learn to be humble. The ego will be thus removed.'

—Swami Chetanananda, *Girish Chandra Ghosh*, 375

third is to raise the hands and bend the waist, followed by placing the palms together at chest height. These are the standard courtesy for greeting peers or one's juniors.⁷

If a senior monastic appears, or the situation requires it, one observes the fifth level of courtesy by genuflecting, or the sixth by kneeling, or the seventh by placing the hands and knees on the ground. If full gestures of respect are called for, then one practises the eighth form by bending the four limbs and touching the head to the ground. Finally, ultimate respect is shown by bowing the entire body to the ground.

In China, since the Sui-Tang period (sixth century CE), the specific gesture is the one based on the Indian *shiraṣābhivandate*, which in Indian bowing courtesy indicates the highest respect. Proper form requires both knees, both elbows, and the forehead to touch the ground before the feet of the person who is the object of reverence. In China this gesture became known as *wu lun tuo di*, 'Five Limbs Touch the Ground'. The canonical texts describe the youth Sudhana, the

archetypal bowing pilgrim, bowing to fifty-three teachers in the 'Gandhavyuha' chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Over and over he prostrates his five limbs to the ground to purge arrogance, repent past offences, demonstrate respect, and ultimately realize the highest goals of a Bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion.

The Benefits of Bowing

As mentioned earlier, Sri Ramakrishna advocated bowing as a method for transforming lust, for ridding oneself of ego, and as a way in every situation to express gratitude to the presence of God. Likewise, the many benefits of reverential bowing are well known to generations of Buddhist faithful. By placing the body in a posture expressive of humility and vulnerability, the practice of bowing combats pride and arrogance. Cheng Guan (783–839 CE), the fourth patriarch of the Avatamsaka school, advised that 'bowing in respect purges the obstacle of arrogance, inspires faith and reverence, and increases one's roots of goodness.'⁸ In other words, it is a physical yoga with a healing psychological function.

Further, an intensely focused bowing practice will keep the mind from running away into discursive thought or scattering into random wandering, thus leading the practitioner towards states of mental concentration. Contemplations

that accompany each step of the bowing gesture allow devotees to repent of offences, visualize the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and reflect deeply on sacred texts. For Buddhists, therefore, bowing is not merely a gesture of courtesy or respect, nor is it primarily a demonstration of reverence towards an object of worship; it is a fully developed inward path that leads the practitioner to the ultimate spiritual goals of compassion and wisdom.

Introducing the Bowing Practice in the West

We have seen via the examples of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching and personal practice as well as our discussion of Chinese Mahayana practices that bowing has been part of Asian spiritual tradition since Buddha's time. How is this practice making its way into Western Buddhist cultivation?

In the autumn of 1969 I lived as a practitioner at Antaiji, a Soto Zen temple in Kyoto, Japan, under the tutelage of Uchiyama Kosho Roshi (1912–98) and his students. I was taught deportment, which included bowing in every situation. Bowing was as automatic as removing one's shoes before stepping up onto the tatami mats on the temple floor.

In the 1970s in San Francisco many Buddhist traditions were putting down roots and transforming their liturgical heritage. Even so, not all teachers of Buddhism in America presented the practice of bowing in its traditional Asian format. The bias against bowing by Protestants and Iconoclasts clearly influenced Buddhist ritual practice as it developed in the West. Some have decided to restrict, interpret, or westernize bowing. Others, such as the late Shunryu Suzuki Roshi (1904–71), founder of the San Francisco Zen Centre, adapted bowing for Americans who meditated at the centre. Suzuki, according to a

Upon arriving at the Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta, he [Ramakrishna] would hurl his powerful weapon—humility—at the Brahmos. He would enter the Brahmo temple and bow down, touching his head to the ground; then addressing the audience, he would say, 'Salutations to the modern Brahma-jnanis.'

—Swami Chetanananda, *How to Live with God*, 183–4

story, seeing the stiff-necked resistance of Americans, not only did not drop bowing to cater to Americans likes and dislikes, rather, he increased the required bows before meditation from three to nine. When asked why he said that in his view Americans need to bow more. Suzuki Roshi, in an article that appeared in *Tricycle* in 1994, asserts that before reaching liberation bowing is serious business and an essential tool for the student of Zen.

Some Buddhist groups chose to downplay bowing as a practice for the West. The Buddhist Churches of America—Jodo Shinshu—and the San Francisco Buddhist Church were the first Buddhist denominations in America to replace centuries-old Asian liturgical devotions with Western style worship. Some would argue that in pruning away Asian devotional elements Jodo Shinshu has become the most Protestant among American Buddhists; others give that title to the Insight Meditation and the Vipassana movement. Two founders of the Insight Meditation, Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, teach the meditation aspect of Theravada Buddhism to Westerners. They set aside the bowing, icons, and liturgies of Thai Buddhist devotional practices. Thus, for different reasons, Jodo Shinshu and Vipassana have stripped away the icons and the bowing in favour of meditation, loving-kindness, and mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha.

Similar to testimonials that Jackson cites above, the author has gathered survey responses that evince bowing's popularity among contemporary college students in northern California. Students from the Humboldt State University, the University of San Francisco, the Stanford University, and the University of California, Berkeley, come regularly to the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, California, for a monastic weekend encounter, as a field trip in their religious study courses. At the end of the

retreat students evaluate what they enjoyed and what they would improve. Some students mention meditation as their hallmark experience. Others enjoy the vegetarian food, the opportunity to talk with monastics, or the tranquillity and orderliness behind the walls of a Buddhist monastery. To my surprise, nearly every retreat brings a similar response: many students prefer the experience of bowing.

An eighteen-year-old Caucasian woman in her sophomore year, an atheist, writes: 'I had never done any religious practice before. The bowing put me off at first; I'd never imagined doing anything at all like that. I felt aversion, but because everybody else was doing it and because the monks and nuns interpreted the actions in psychological terms, it didn't seem so threatening. When the time came I simply bowed and that was that. Once I tried bowing, it lost its strangeness. By the time I finished the first ceremony, I didn't even notice that I had been bowing for an hour.'

A nineteen-year-old male sophomore from a culturally Jewish background writes: 'I realize that I had never before taken part in a religious ceremony of any kind. My parents never introduced me to religion. Joining the bowing and the chanting felt like water touching a thirsty plant. A part of my heart opened that hadn't been touched before.'

This is the testimony of a nineteen-year-old male college junior who was raised in a Baptist home: 'When I left the ceremony hall, I felt lighter in spirit, as if I had left cares and years behind on that bowing bench. I went back and bowed by myself for an hour in the darkened Buddha Hall. I wanted to clean out while I had the chance.'

Conclusions

Buddhist and Hindu practice in Asia, from the

Sri Ramakrishna went to the porch for a few minutes and then returned. As he was going out, Vishva-mbhar's daughter, six or seven years old, saluted him. On returning to the room, the Master began talking to the little girl and her companions, who were of the same age.

THE CHILD (to the Master): 'I saluted you and you didn't even notice it.'

MASTER (smiling): 'Did you? I really didn't notice.'

CHILD: 'Then wait. I want to salute you again—the other foot too.'


Sri Ramakrishna laughed and sat down. He returned the salute and bowed to the child, touching the ground with his forehead.

—*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 490

earliest times, has valued the practices of bowing and devotion. Whether Westerner devotees will, like their Asian counterparts, adopt bowing as a way to deepen their practice remains to be seen. In many theistic traditions bowing has largely an exterior focus, consistent with the supporting theology. In Buddhism the focus of bowing turns back to the mind of the bowing instead of moving outward towards a wholly transcendent other. In Vedanta Sri Ramakrishna identified the interior function of bowing in reducing pride and ego, an observation that coincides with the Buddha's description of bowing's basic purpose.

In Buddhism the myriad practices relate back to a central theme: purifying the mind and seeing the nature. The mind and its nature are fundamentally *Buddha*. The goal of the spiritual path is to gradually remove all aspects of the view of self, until one rediscovers his or her non-dual nature. Bowing, as a path to the non-dual reality, helps empty out and purify false concepts within. The

false, illusory self is being erased as one bows. Buddhist bowing, therefore, aims to reveal the unsubstantial nature of both self and phenomena.

In both Hinduism and Buddhism devotional practice in general and bowing in particular represent a deeper dimension of practice awaiting exploration by cultivators of purity and contemplation, Western and Eastern alike. While in Chinese Buddhism bowing grew from its Indian sources, we can expect a Western form of bowing to emerge from its encounter with psychology and the search for individual freedom. 

Notes and References

1. The very first organized Buddhist mission to San Francisco was the Japanese Pure Land Choteau Hsinchu sect, which established the San Francisco Buddhist Church in 1898. Master Hsuan Hua ordained the first group of Western Buddhist monastics at Gold Mountain monastery in San Francisco in 1969. Regarding Vedanta's popularity in North America one may take Swami Vivekananda's arrival at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions in 1893 as the starting point.
2. Karl T Jackson, *Vedanta for the West*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), 99.
3. 'Those who have the time must meditate and worship. But those who cannot possibly do so must bow down whole-heartedly to God twice a day.' M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 385.
4. Judith Lief, 'On Practice: Bowing', *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, 9/1 (Fall, 1994), 33.
5. Eric Reinders, 'The Iconoclasm of Obeisance: Protestant Images of Chinese Religion and the Catholic Church', *Numen: The International Review for the History of Religions*, 44/3 (September 1997), 296–322.
6. *Gospel*, 433.
7. Xuanzang, 'Extensive Discussion of the Customs of India', in *Record of the Western Regions in the Great Tang*, Chapter 2.
8. Cheng Guan, 'Universal Worthy Bodhisattva's Practices and Vows', in *Exegesis to the Flower Adornment Sutra*.

Sri Ramakrishna's Legacy from Buddhist and Jain Perspectives

Prof. Padmanabh S Jaini

IN HIS MAJESTIC WORK *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, Swami Saradananda presents succinctly the Master's spiritual life and message:

After performing sadhana according to the main religious denominations prevalent in India, he observed that each one of them led the aspirant towards the nondual plane. ... When we asked about the nondual state, he [Sri Ramakrishna] told us repeatedly: 'It is the finale, my child, the culmination of sadhana. At the ultimate development of love for God, this nondual experience manifests spontaneously in the life of all aspirants. *Know it to be the goal of all faiths; and as many faiths, so many paths.*'¹

Swami Vivekananda, the sage of the new age, proclaims the reason for and the function of a new avatara—not foretold in the Puranas—in the form of Sri Ramakrishna: 'During this current spiritual renaissance, the new avatar of the age, endowed with tremendous divine power, will gather together the divided and scattered religious ideals, practise and realize them in his own life, and rediscover the knowledge that was lost. To bring this about, the all-merciful *God has therefore incarnated Himself as an avatar in this present age*' (385; emphasis mine).

Swami Vivekananda is a world-renowned saint and commands the respect of all Indians.

He certainly speaks for all Vedic religions, whether founded on the dualism of Sri Madhva, qualified non-dualism of Sri Ramanuja, the traditions known as Shaiva and Shakta, and the bhakti movements culminating in the school of Sri Chaitanya. All faiths based on them are valid and will lead the aspirant to the goal of the non-dual—Advaita—Brahman of the Upanishads, the Vedanta. It is evident from the words 'God' and 'avatara' that these Vedic 'faiths'—broadly known as Vaishnava, Shaiva, or Smarta—are theistic. They believe in the existence of an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent Creator—God, Ishvara—who bestows devotion as well as liberation, moksha, to devotees out of his divine grace. As this is a fundamental doctrine, it is claimed that even non-Indian theistic religions like Christianity and Islam, with their own scriptures and practices, can lead their followers to the same goal of the non-dual Brahman.

Buddha as Avatara

It may be asked how the two 'atheistic' Indian religions—Buddhism and Jainism—which reject the doctrine of a creator God and yet believe in liberation, find place in the Master's vision of all 'paths' leading to the non-dual experience. Fortunately, Swami Saradananda has anticipated this and provides the following answer:

Knowing that the Master attained perfection in the major religions of the world, a question might arise in the reader's mind regarding the Master's view about Buddha. Therefore

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it is good to record here what we know about this. In regard to Buddha the Master shared the same beliefs as all Hindus: He always offered loving worship and reverence to *Buddha as a divine incarnation*, and he believed that Buddha still manifests in the holy triad in the temple at Puri, as Jagannath, Subhadra, and Balarama. When the Master heard about the glory of the holy shrine of Jagannath and that His prasad removes all distinctions of high and low status, as well as of caste, he was eager to visit Puri (358; emphasis mine).

The Buddha as an avatara, like Rama and Krishna, is indeed a great puzzle. It is not known when or by which Vedic faith the historical Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha (d. 450 BCE) was declared an avatara of Vishnu. This might have happened around 300 CE, in the area near the Buddhist stupa sites of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in Andhra. In the canonical texts Buddha is always called Bhagavan.

A splinter group of the Theravadins called the Lokottaravadins, the forerunners of Mahayana, maintained that Shakyamuni, whose conception, birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and death, *parinirvāṇa*, were attended by miracles, was 'super-mundane', *lokottara*, by nature, and that he acted like an ordinary person—got married, begot a child, and died—merely to conform to the ways of the world, *lokānuvartana*. He was worshipped in ornate shrines, and grand stupas were raised in his honour.

In the fully developed Mahayana, it was asserted that the Buddha had attained enlightenment, *bodhi*, countless aeons, *kalpas*, ago, but had chosen not to enter into *parinirvāṇa*. Instead, out of compassion, he was appearing again and again as a Buddha—our historical Shakyamuni being one such—an 'avatara' of his own! The extraordinary popularity of this sect among members of all four castes might have been a

major factor in bringing such a figure within the theistic fold by bestowing upon Buddha the status of an avatara of Vishnu.

The earliest reference to this new avatara is to be found in the 'Shanti Parva' of the Mahabharata. Bhishma is lying on his deathbed of arrows and offers homage to Lord Krishna, in course of which he lists ten avatars one by one—beginning with the Fish, Matsya, and ending with Kalki, the tenth. Krishna is the eighth and Buddha the ninth. He is the avatara of our age:

*Dānavāms-tu vaśe kṛtvā
punar-buddhatvam āgataḥ;
Sargasya rakṣaṇārthāya tasmai
buddhatmane namaḥ.*

Again, for the sake of protecting the world, He came as Buddha and brought the demons under control. Salutations to that Lord, identified as Buddha.²

The Puranic compilers of this episode make no mention of Buddha's place of birth, his well known *gotra* name Gautama, his kshatriya clan, called Shakya, and even his atheistic views, and give him the dubious function of controlling the demons—this being one of the purposes of an avatara—by preaching them a counterfeit dharma, *apadharma*, as is mentioned in the Bhagavata:

*Deva-dviṣāṁ nigama-vartmani niṣṭhitānāṁ
pūrbhir-mayena vihitābhir-adrśya-tūrbhiḥ;
Lokān ghnatāṁ mati-vimoham-ati-pralobham
veṣaṁ vidhāya bahu bhāśhyata aupadarmyam.*

The enemies of gods (the demons) perform Vedic sacrifices (to amass power) to destroy the world of human beings with aerial vehicles of unperceivable speed constructed by the demon Maya. Then will the Lord take the form (of Buddha) and preach to them a counterfeit dharma (against the Vedas), producing excessive greed and delusion in their minds, thus making them powerless.³

The credit for assigning a positive and

compassionate role to the Buddha avatara—and thus making him the only 'non-violent' avatara—goes to the twelfth-century Vaishnava poet Jayadeva. In 'Jaya Jagadisha Hare!', the opening poem of his *GitaGovinda*, he hails the Lord's ten avatars in the traditional manner. But coming to the Buddha-avatara, he praises Buddha for his compassion and his censure of violence committed in the Vedic sacrifices:

*Nindasi yajña-vidher-ahaha śruti-jātam
sadaya-hṛdaya-darśita-paśughātam;
Keshava dhṛta-buddha-śarīra
jaya jagadīśa hare.*

Moved by deep compassion you condemn the Vedic way that ordains animal slaughter in rites of sacrifice. O Keshava (Krishna)! You assume the form of the enlightened Buddha. Triumph Hari, lord of the world.⁴

The Buddha-avatara known to Sri Ramakrishna at Jagannath Puri is probably the same as described in the *GitaGovinda*: a compassionate reformer who eliminated killing of animals from Vedic sacrifices. The belief that its prasada removes all distinctions of caste also points to a historical connection of this avatara with the Puri temple from ancient times.

This demonstrates how the theist and atheist traditions found a meeting point in the observance of non-violence, ahimsa, a fundamental principle for both paths. It should be noted however that the Buddhists themselves do not appear to be aware at any time in history that Buddha was being hailed as a divine incarnation, or they chose knowingly to ignore it, considering it the devotion of people innocent of his teachings.

Buddhism, Jainism, and Swami Vivekananda

As is well known, when Swami Vivekananda spoke at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 11 September 1893, he was not rep-

resenting all three Indian religions. Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) of Ceylon spoke on 'The World's Debt to Buddha'. Virchand Raghavji Gandhi (1864–1901) from Gujarat spoke on 'The Philosophy and Ethics of Jainism'. Speaking on 'Hinduism' Swami Vivekananda raised an important question: 'How can, then, the Hindu whose whole idea centers in God believe in the Buddhist who is agnostic, or the Jain who is atheist?' He followed it with a profound answer: 'The whole force of their [Buddhist and Jain] religion is directed to the great central truth in every religion, to evolve a God out of man. They have not seen the Father, but they have seen the Son. And he that hath seen the Son hath seen the father.'⁵

We may humbly pass over the expressions 'father' and 'son', as Swamiji was speaking to a largely Christian audience. But his words 'to evolve a God out of man' will be appropriate to the two admittedly atheistic faiths as well, if we change them to 'evolve a Buddha (the awakened one), or a Jina (the spiritual victor) out of man'. Both titles affirm the belief that they were, like all other souls, once 'bound' and later became 'awakened' or 'liberated'. The term 'Jina' was originally applied to both Gautama and Mahavira. Around the 5th century it appears to have come to be exclusively used for Mahavira; hence, his followers were called 'Jaina'. The word 'Jina' is conspicuously missing in the theistic tradition.

A close examination will show that there is only a minute but significant difference between the God of the theists and a Buddha or a Jina. In his *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali defines God, Ishvara, in the following three sutras: (i) The Supreme Lord is an extraordinary spirit, *puruṣa-viśeṣa*, unaffected by afflictions, actions, their fruits, and dispositions; (ii) in him rests the highest stage of the 'seed of omniscience'; and (iii) the Lord is the greatest teacher, guru, of even the earliest great ones, being unconditioned by time.⁶

In the first sutra it is asserted that this *puruṣa* is unique, because he was never bound to or affected by afflictions, actions, and so forth. He alone is eternally 'liberated', while other *puruṣas* are not so free.⁷ Only this supreme *puruṣa* is omniscient. He is therefore the true teacher of the path to liberation. Buddhists and Jains reject the existence of such an exception and hold the view that all souls are bound from beginning-less, *anādi*, time—as there is no beginning to Creation—but are capable of becoming totally free from afflictions and other bonds.

The Buddhist and Jain traditions do not claim omnipresence or omnipotence for their respective masters, only omniscience, *sarvajñatva*, at the end of their spiritual quest; and neither acknowledged a teacher. They also hold that the state of liberation—*nirvana* or *moksha*—is the same for all souls, albeit only a few may aspire to take the voluntary role of a teacher as well. The historical Buddha, Gautama, and the Jina, Mahavira, are therefore seen as the most prominent liberated beings, teachers, and exemplars of our times.

At the 1893 Parliament of Religions; left to right: Narasimhacharya, Lakshminarayan, Swami Vivekananda, Anagarika Dharmapala (Buddhist representative), and Virchand Gandhi (Jaina representative)



They are the visible links in the chain of a countless number of similarly liberated beings, *mukta puruṣas*, in the infinite past. This line of *muktas* is beginning-less and endless, as is the teaching of dharma, the means of liberation.

As to the description of Buddhism as 'agnostic', such a view was indeed prevalent in Swamiji's time among the scholars of the Pali of Theravada—Teaching of the Elders—Buddhism. In a famous sermon a Buddhist monk Chulamalunkya putta asks Buddha to answer definitively the four sets of philosophical questions: (i) Whether the world is eternal, or non-eternal, or both, or neither; (ii) whether the world is finite (in space), or infinite, or both, or neither; (iii) if the soul, *jiva*, is identical with the body or different from it; (iv) whether the Tathagata, a Buddha or a liberated being, exists after death, or does not.

Buddha saw how an affirmative answer to these questions would lead to the dogma, *dṛṣṭi*, of eternalism, *śāśvata-vāda*, while the negative would lead to the dogma of annihilationism, *uccheda-vāda*. Seeking to avoid the extremes and following a middle course, *madhyama-pratipada*, the Buddha declared them to be the four inexpressibles, *catvāri avyākṛta-vastūni*.

In course of time the Buddhist master Nagarjuna (c.3rd cent.), the founder of the Madhyamika school, would explain the true significance of the Buddha's Middle Path. In his profoundly insightful study of this system, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Professor T R V Murti expounds on Buddha's 'silence', and points to the essence of his Middle Path: 'On the opposition of the eternalist and nihilist views, Buddha erected another and more fundamental opposition—that between dogmatism and criticism—which is the analytic or reflective

awareness of them as dogmatic theories. Criticism is deliverance of the human mind from all entanglements and passions. It is freedom itself. This is the true Madhyamika point.⁸ Further, 'The Tathagata does not spin speculative theories. He is free from all theories. He has realized that the Real is transcendent to thought' (45). Thus is explained the Buddhist concept of abiding in *śūnyatā*—*śūnyatā sarva-dṛṣṭinām*, the 'emptiness of all views—that is, *śūnyatā* is not 'void', but being 'devoid of' all dogmatic views.

But such transcendence is not easily achieved in a single lifetime. As is well known, like Vedānta, Buddhism was also a system of immense diversity, seemingly offering different 'ways' or 'vehicles', *yāna*, by which one could arrive at the goal of nirvana: freedom from the cycles of birth and death. Buddhist mendicants, male and female, *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*, the immediate disciples of Gautama Buddha, followed the Path of Listeners, *śrāvaka-yāna*, and were known as arhats, 'saints as disciples'. It was also believed that, in the absence of a Buddha, certain rare individuals may intuitively attain the same goal as the arhats, and were called *pratyeka-buddhas*, 'solitary non-disciple saints'. All believed that they had achieved nirvana and would not be reborn, *na'tthi dāni punabbhavo*. They would be proved wrong by a new set of scriptures, the Advanced Teachings, imparted by the Buddha, for the benefit of the same arhats, and a few new aspirants as well. This demonstrated his skillfulness in employing expedient devices, *upāya-kauśalya*, according to the needs of individuals seeking nirvana.

This was called the teaching of the Great Way, Mahayana, in contrast to the Lower Way, Hinayana, of the earlier texts. The Mahayana was for a new kind of aspirant, called bodhisattva, one who aspires to become a Buddha, or *samyak-sambuddha*, 'the supremely enlightened one'. The bodhisattva strives over innumerable births

to bring his virtues—charity, patience, and so forth—to perfection, *pāramitā*, while serving others to bring them to maturity so that they too may enter the same Great Way.

A Mahayana text called the *Saddharma-pundarika Sutra*, popularly known as the *Lotus Sutra*, declares that there are not 'three ways' to attain nirvana, but only 'one way', *eka-yāna*—that of the Buddha. It then explains the validity of the earlier teachings given by Buddha to his disciples:

Knowing that the multitude craves the lesser Dharma and fears Great Wisdom ... by resort to numberless expedient devices (*upāya*) they convert varieties of living beings. The Buddhas, by their power of devising expedients create distinctions, preaching three vehicles, but there is in fact only one Buddha vehicle. And it is to provide a resting place that the other two were preached. Now for your sake I preach the reality. ... For the sake of Buddha omniscience you must put forth great and vigorous effort.⁹

That the Buddha inspired such dedication among the bodhisattvas is demonstrated by the following recitation by certain Japanese Zen masters as they begin their meditation:

Sentient beings are numberless;
I vow to save them.
Desires are inexhaustible;
I vow to put an end to them.
The Dharmas (Teachings) are boundless;
I vow to master them.
The Buddha's Way is unsurpassable;
I vow to attain it.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that freedom from dogmatism that leads to the evolution of a 'Buddha out of man' might indeed provide a legitimate ground for Sri Ramakrishna's belief in the Buddha-avatara. It will also come close to what Swami Vivekananda called the central truth of religion: 'to evolve God out of man'.

Sri Ramakrishna and Jainism

It would seem that in contrast to Buddha, the Jina made no impact on the Master. Swami Saradananda briefly notes:

In the later part of his life, the Master heard from some Jains about the Tirthankaras, the founders of Jainism. ... In his room beside the picture of Hindu gods and goddesses there was a stone image of Mahavir[a] Tirthankar[a] and a picture of Jesus. Every morning and evening the Master would wave incense before all the deities, including the last two. Although he showed his love and respect for all we never heard him speak of the Tirthankaras of the Jains ... as avatars.¹⁰

Swami Vivekananda's characterization of Jainism as 'atheistic' was correct and would be welcome to Jains. From earliest times the Jains have indeed engaged in polemical debates with theists and called upon them to abide by reasoning. Acharya Haribhadra (6th cent.) says in his *Lokatattvanirnaya*:

*Pakṣapāto na me vire
na dveṣaḥ kapilādiṣu;
Yuktimaḍ vacanaṁ yasya
tasya kāryaḥ parigrahaḥ.*

I have no partiality for Mahavira, or hatred towards Kapila and other seers; we should accept one whose words stand the scrutiny of logic.¹¹

While the Buddhists followed the Middle Path, in practice as well as in doctrine, the Jains favoured an approach of non-absolutism, *anekānta-tā*. This is the doctrine of harmonious juxtaposition of opposites—such as bondage and freedom, change and subsistence—in one and the same substance, *dravya*, like a soul, jiva, or a material atom. The Jains asserted that the eternalist explains samsara only by resorting to *māyāvāda*, the doctrine of maya, while the non-eternalist, Buddhist, fails to explain nirvana as anything but 'extinction', *uccheda*.

An aversion to violence is central to Jain ethics. They therefore focused their examination on the gods of Puranic theism, notably the careers of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesha. Comparing them to the Jina, the 10th century Jain mendicant Akalanka lays down three pre-requisites for a person to be worthy of worship:

*Yo viśvaṁ veda vedyam janana-jalanidher
bhanginaḥ pāra-draṣṭā paurvāparyāvairuddham
vacanam-anupamaṁ niṣkalankaṁ yadīyam;*

*Tam vande sādhu-vandyaṁ nikhila-guṇanidhiṁ
dhvasta-dveṣa-dviṣantam buddham vā
vardhamānaṁ śatadala-nilayaṁ keśavaṁ vā
śivaṁ vā.*

Whoever knows all that is to be known, and sees beyond the billowing ocean of births; whose words, not marred by inconsistencies, stand supreme in truthful purity; such a man do I revere, beholding in him, one worthy of exceeding reverence, vessel of virtues, in whom the taint of hatred is effaced, whether [he be] Buddha, Mahavira, Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva.

The Jains were open to the possibility of non-Jain mendicants and even lay persons following the obligatory precepts of ahimsa, truthfulness, celibacy, and non-possession, *aparigraha*, and the path of peace, *upaśama*. They are included in the expression: 'I bow down respectfully to all saints in the universe; *namo loe savva-sāhūnam*.' In the words of Mahavira: 'The essence of spiritual life is peace; *uvasama-sāram khu sāmannaṁ*.'¹²

The words of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda on Buddhism and Jainism exhibit a great amount of goodwill towards these two non-theistic branches of a single Sanatana (Eternal) Dharma. A vast gap of more than two thousand years separates Buddha from Sri Ramakrishna. The bodhisattva path, which combined work—out of compassion, *karuṇā*—for the welfare of many, *bahujana-hita*, with insightful meditation,

dhyāna and *prajñā*, was a noble legacy, a gift of Buddha to the world. While it flourished with significant changes in China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet, Buddhism, in its pure form, disappeared from India around the 6th century, soon after the fall of the Gupta Empire.

It is possible however to see its resurrection after almost a thousand years, albeit brought about unknowingly and without using the word 'bodhisattva'. It happened during the lifetime of the Master, when he initiated a large group of dedicated young men, the original swamis of the Ramakrishna Order. This bodhisattva ideal seems to be embedded in a special category of souls, called *īśvarakotis*. Such a person is not an incarnation, *avatara*, of God, but is 'a godlike, ever-free soul, born with a spiritual message for humanity. Ramakrishna considered six of his disciples to be *ishwarakotis*.'¹³ Prominent among them was Narendra, the future Swami Vivekananda.

From Emperor Ashoka to Sri Ramakrishna

As regards the Master's own legacy, Swami Saradananda sums it up in these few words: 'All religions are true—as many faiths, so many paths. ... [The Mother] preserved his body in mysterious ways for one purpose: to eradicate as far as possible religious narrowness from this world. The world was eager to receive this eternally beneficial message' (646–7). It would seem the Master's thoughts posthumously reached the organizers of the world's first Parliament of Religions held at Chicago. In his 'Words of Welcome', Charles C Bonney was probably relaying the message of the Master himself:

We meet on the mountain height of absolute respect for the religious convictions of each other; and an earnest desire for a better knowledge of the consolations which other forms of faith than our own offer to their devotees. The very

basis of our convocation is the idea that the representatives of each religion sincerely believe that it is the truest and the best of all; and that they will, therefore, hear with perfect candor and without fear the convictions of other sincere souls on the great questions of the immortal life.¹⁴

Soon followed Swami Vivekananda's eloquent speech, his first on the world stage, with its call for the 'harmony of religions': 'Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have possessed long this beautiful earth. ... But its time has come, and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this Convention may be the death knell to all fanaticism, to all persecutions with the sword or the pen, and to all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.'¹⁵

So, at the dawn of this momentous epoch, the message of harmony of religions had been proclaimed. This boundless and all-embracing idea, which had been hidden in the Vedic scriptures and religion, was rediscovered and declared to humanity with a clarion call.

While stating that he was 'proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance' Swamiji was referring to the foundation of all Indian religions: Sanatana Dharma, the 'eternal law' governing humankind. The harmony of religions enjoined by Vedic scriptures had to be honoured by righteous rulers. Fortunately, we have inscriptional records of one such monarch of ancient India, the great Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (273–32 BCE), who made it a state policy to promote the 'harmony of religions'. This fact was not widely known at the time of the Chicago Parliament of Religions, or Swamiji would have proudly quoted Ashoka's words, calling for the practice of the 'dharma of concord', *samavāya*, words unparalleled in any royal decree, even

to this day. There is a gap of over two thousand years between Emperor Ashoka and Sri Ramakrishna. But as the few lines from royal inscriptions cited in the next section will show, Ashoka's inheritance, which was lost for centuries like a nugget of gold buried under rocks, was discovered by the Master and displayed by Swami Vivekananda to the world at large.

Samavāya eva Sādhu

That Ashoka was not speaking about his personal religion but the Sanatana Dharma is evidenced from his concept of 'dharma' in Pillar Edict VII: 'King Priyadarshin, the beloved of the gods, says thus ... The noble deeds of Dharma and conformity to Dharma are increased among the people thus, by performing acts of compassion, charity, truthfulness, purity, happiness and saintliness.'¹⁶ Ashoka uses the term *pāṣaṇḍa* for 'religions' whose followers competed with each other—for instance, the Tapasas or brahmana ascetics, Bhagavatas, Ajivikas, Buddhists, and Niganthas or Jains. At a later time the word *pāṣaṇḍa* or *pākhaṇḍa* came to be applied to heresy.

In Rock Edict XII Ashoka spells out the merits of harmony:

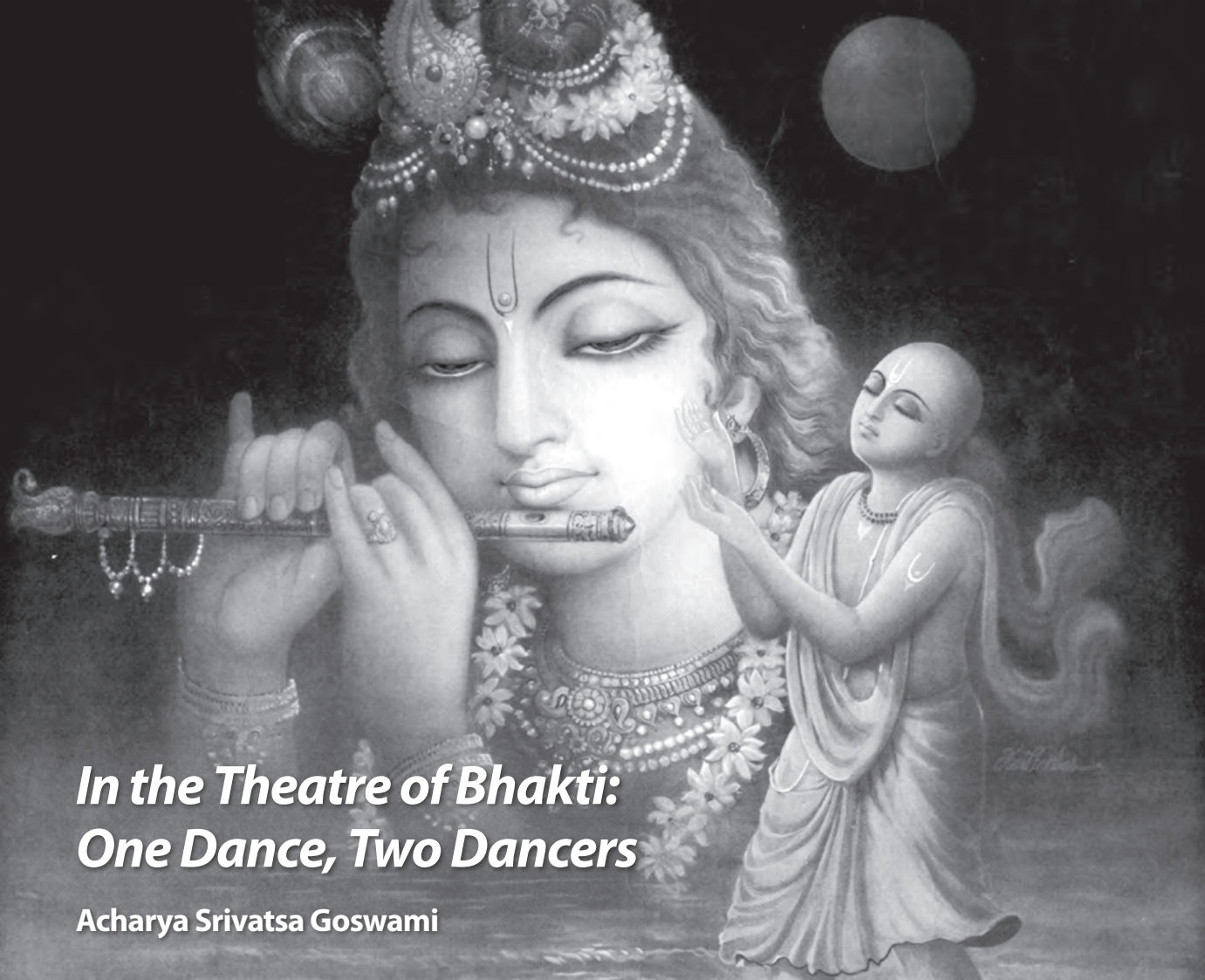
King Priyadarshin honours persons of all sects (*pāṣaṇḍa*), ascetics and householders, by gifts with various forms of reverence. But, the beloved of the gods does not value either gifts or reverential offerings as much as that of an increase of the spiritual strength of all religions (*pāṣaṇḍa*). This increase of spiritual strength is of many kinds. But the one root is the guarding of one's speech so as to avoid the extolling of one's own religion to the decrying of the religion of another, speaking lightly of it without occasion. As proper occasions arise, persons of other religions should also be honoured suitably. Acting in this manner one certainly exalts one's own religionists (*ātma-pāṣaṇḍān*) and also helps persons of other religions (*para-*

pāṣaṇḍān). One who honours one's own religion and disparages that of another from devotion to one's own religion to glorify it over all other religions, does injure one's own religion more certainly. It is verily concord [of all religions] that is meritorious (ibid.).

Sri Ramakrishna would heartily agree. 

Notes and References

1. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003), 318; emphasis mine.
2. Mahabharata, 12.47.67; see *Sriman Mahabharatam* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1957), 3.366. This verse is not found in the critical edition of the Mahabharata; it is found only in five manuscripts, all but one of which are from South India, and one of which is in Devanagari.
3. Bhagavata, 2.7.37.
4. *Gitagovinda*, 1.13.
5. See Neely's *History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World's Columbian Exposition*, ed. Walter Raleigh Houghton (Neely, 1894), 444.
6. *Yoga Sutra*, 1.24-6.
7. In his gloss on *Yoga Sutra*, 1.24, Vachaspati Mishra says, '*Asya punaḥ sarvadaiva tathātvāt na muktātma-tulyatvam*; moreover, being always so (ever free), He does not bear comparison with liberated souls.'
8. T R V Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 41.
9. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sutra)*, trans. Leon Hurvitz (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 140-1.
10. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 359.
11. Acharya Haribhadra, *Lokatattvanirnaya*, 1.38.
12. *Kalpāsutra*, 286.
13. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, 965.
14. Charles Carroll Bonney, 'Words of Welcome' in *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism, Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions*, 1893, ed. Richard Hughes Seager (Open Court, 1993), 21.
15. *The World's Parliament of Religions*, ed. John Henry Barrows, 2 vols (Chicago: Parliament Publishing, 1893), 1.102.
16. See K V Rangaswami Aiyangar: *Edicts of Ashoka* (Madras: Adyar Library, 1951), 121.



In the Theatre of Bhakti: One Dance, Two Dancers

Acharya Srivatsa Goswami

IT IS GOOD TO REMEMBER that history does not record a single instance of a spiritual revolution of global dimensions brought by a band of scholars and skilful thinkers. The malady of the world is far too universal and deep-seated for remedies to be prescribed direct from books. A spiritual genius of the order of Buddha or Christ alone knows how to strike at the things,' reminded a contemporary Indian philosopher, Professor T R V Murti.¹

The author, a reputed Vaishnava preceptor and scholar, is associated with the Sri Radharaman Mandir, Vrindaban, and is also founder Director, Sri Chaitanya Prem Sansthan, Vrindaban.

The poet, thinker, and philosopher Nirala echoes and elaborates this view:

In a country which is a large congregation of Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Parsi-Jain-Sikh and other religious practitioners, imitating other nations and relegating dharma to a secondary status and a national integration merely on paper will not work. Imitation is one thing, understanding the spirit another. The spirit of other countries is self-centered; they cannot think of anything other than the minute details of their self-interests. In India dharma is life. The education of this country is totally different. Here only the politics based on dharma is acceptable. The pressure of politics imposed on the people due to subjection is

not acceptable to the spirit of India; hence, in time, this politics will definitely vanish from the heart of India like an ink stain. The soul of [its] principle speaks thus. And therefore, we have to affirm that selfless love is the only means to national goodwill and the architect of this means is the life-long ascetic, the luminous and radiant Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna. This is the reason for his unflinching sadhana on [the paths of] Jesus, Muhammad, Rama, Krishna, and Kali. That is why he occupies the seat of the pathfinder and prophet of the age. Otherwise, he had attained moksha—which is said to take millions of births—by one spiritual discipline itself. The sincere goodwill of the plane of Vedanta, attained by Sri Ramakrishna through sadhana, is the only path for the revival of India and its meeting the world on an equal footing. Otherwise, the feeling of high and low will surely remain. The strife between the victorious and the vanquished will surely remain. The question of blacks and whites will surely remain. This puzzle will never be resolved through the race of intellects.²

God Sports as Man

While celebrating the hundred-and-seventy-fifth birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna, it is important to know who he is. In his *Kalpataru ki Utsav Lila*, an autobiographical rendition of the life of Sri Ramakrishna in Hindi, Krishnabihari Mishra has Sri Ramakrishna saying:

See master [Mahendranth Gupta], Adhar is dozing. ... [to Adhar] It's late. Go wake up your horse carriage. Government job the whole day and then the burden of my babble. You know Adhar, your master is no less. If outwardly he looks so serious, inwardly his tricks are equally deep. We were chatting in the garden. I asked master how many annas worth my earnings were. Despite being a teacher, he said, 'I don't know about annas, I only see Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in your form.' Isn't this the limit of joking, Adhar? Where is the

comparison between [Pandit] Nimai and this stupid Gadai! Well done, master, well done!³

M was not off the mark. He was just revealing the truth. In his biography of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda writes: 'It was the firm conviction of the Master that the One who in past ages had incarnated Himself as Rama, Krishna, Gauranga and others had come down to the world in his own person.'⁴ It was not merely a self-portrait, but a truth reflected in his being. Those who interacted with him could see and experience this without any ambiguity. Similarly, Sri Chaitanya revealed himself time and again in a six-armed form, where each pair of arms represented Sri Ramachandra, Sri Krishna and Sri Chaitanya himself.

Despite Sri Ramakrishna's dislike for any comparison between Gadai—Gadadhar was his childhood name—and Nimai, Sri Chaitanya, any attempt to understand one without the other will be incomplete. What do we look for in their person and in their contribution to humanity? When someone asked Mahatma Gandhi about his message, he replied, 'My life is my message.'⁵ This is true even more with regard to Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna. Mahatma Gandhi was a prolific writer, but these two religious giants did not 'write down' their message. They lived what they had to say. We are lucky to have a large corpus of biographical material that extensively and accurately provides us with the nectar of their lives and sayings.

One may be amused at any exercise of looking at two personalities born three hundred and fifty years apart. The present is born out of the womb of the past, and the seed of the future is already lying in the soil of the present. Nothing will give birth to *no-thing*; *some-thing* comes out of something alone. In the six-armed form that Sri Chaitanya manifested to his close companions time

and again, the two arms holding a staff and bowl of a sannyasin are Sri Chaitanya's own. The two raised upper arms hold an arrow and a bow, and the middle two play a flute. Respectively, they signify Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna, who are integral to his body. The spiritual substance of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna manifests in the body of Sri Chaitanya. A similar intertextuality is witnessed in the being of Sri Ramakrishna and his followers. In addition to Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, and Mother Kali, Sri Ramakrishna also imbibed Sri Chaitanya in his being. Chronologically, Sri Chaitanya precedes Sri Ramakrishna. In the order of discovery, Sri Ramakrishna is the key to knowing his predecessors. He had a clear view of Sri Chaitanya.

Sri Ramakrishna said: 'God sports in the world as man. He incarnates Himself as man—as in the case of Krishna, Rama, and Chaitanya. ... If you seek God, you must seek Him in the Incarnations.'⁶ Further, 'God has different forms, and He sports in different ways. He sports as Isvara, deva, man, and the universe. In every age He descends to earth in human form, as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion. There is the instance of Chaitanya' (257).

Sri Ramakrishna explains the three states of consciousness that manifested in Sri Chaitanya's person:

Chaitanya experienced three states of mind. First, the conscious state, when his mind dwelt on the gross and the subtle. Second, the semi-conscious state, when his mind entered the causal body and was absorbed in the bliss of divine intoxication. Third, the inmost state, when his mind was merged in the Great Cause.

This agrees very well with the five koshas, or 'sheaths' described in the Vedanta. The gross body corresponds to the annamayakosha and the pranamayakosha, the subtle body to the manomayakosha and the vijñanamayakosha,

and the causal body to the anandamayakosha. The Mahakarana, the Great Cause, is beyond the five sheaths. When Chaitanya's mind merged in That, he would go into samadhi. This is called the nirvikalpa or jada samadhi.

While conscious of the outer world, Chaitanya sang the name of God; while in the state of partial consciousness, he danced with the devotees; and while in the inmost state of consciousness, he remained absorbed in samadhi. ...

Chaitanya was Divine Love incarnate. He came down to earth to teach people how to love God. One achieves everything when one loves God (330).

Love Divine

What is that love of God or bhakti? How does one attain it? Sri Ramakrishna gives a succinct account of the nature of bhakti, both as a goal and a means:

It isn't any and every kind of bhakti that enables one to realize God. One cannot realize God without prema-bhakti. Another name for prema-bhakti is raga-bhakti. God cannot be realized without love and longing. Unless one has learnt to love God, one cannot realize Him.

There is another kind of bhakti, known as vaidhi-bhakti, according to which one must repeat the name of God a fixed number of times, fast, make pilgrimages, worship God with prescribed offerings, make so many sacrifices, and so forth and so on. By continuing such practices a long time one gradually acquires raga-bhakti. God cannot be realized until one has raga-bhakti. One must love God. In order to realize God one must be completely free from worldliness and direct all of one's mind to Him.

But some acquire raga-bhakti directly. It is innate in them. They have it from their very childhood. Even at an early age they weep for God. An instance of such bhakti is to be found in Prahlada. Vaidhi-bhakti is like moving a fan to make a breeze. One needs the fan to make

the breeze. Similarly, one practises japa, austerity, and fasting, in order to acquire love of God. But the fan is set aside when the southern breeze blows of itself. Such actions as japa and austerity drop away when one spontaneously feels love and attachment for God. Who, indeed, will perform the ceremonies enjoined in the scriptures, when mad with love of God? (172–3).

He continues:

Devotion to God may be said to be ‘green’ so long as it doesn’t grow into love of God; but it becomes ‘ripe’ when it has grown into such love.

A man with ‘green’ bhakti cannot assimilate spiritual talk and instruction; but one with ‘ripe’ bhakti can. The image that falls on a photographic plate covered with black film is retained. On the other hand, thousands of images may be reflected on a bare piece of glass, but not one of them is retained. As the object moves away, the glass becomes the same as it was before. One cannot assimilate spiritual instruction unless one has already developed love of God. ...

One can see God through bhakti alone. But it must be ‘ripe’ bhakti, prema-bhakti and raga-bhakti. When one has that bhakti, one loves God even as the mother loves the child, the child the mother, or the wife the husband’ (173).

In short: ‘Nishtha leads to bhakti; bhakti, when mature, becomes bhava; bhava, when concentrated, becomes mahabhava; and last of all is prema. Prema is like a cord: by prema God is bound to the devotee; He can no longer run away. An ordinary man can at best achieve bhava. None but an Isvarakoti attains mahabhava and prema. Chaitanyadeva attained them’ (680).

Sri Chaitanya, propounder of this path of bhakti, ‘had the brilliance of the sun—the sun of knowledge. Further he radiated the soothing light of the moon of Devotion. He was endowed with

both—the Knowledge of Brahman and ecstatic love of God (485). Sri Ramakrishna also says:

In the Kaliyuga the life of man is centred on food. He cannot get rid of the feeling that he is the body and the ego. Therefore the path of devotion is prescribed for this cycle. This is an easy path. You will attain God if you sing His name and glories and pray to Him with a longing heart. There is not the least doubt about it. ...

One can attain the Knowledge of Brahman, too, by following the path of bhakti. God is all-powerful. He may give His devotee Brahmajñana also, if He so wills. But the devotee generally doesn’t seek the Knowledge of the Absolute. He would rather have the consciousness that God is the Master and he the servant, or that God is the Divine Mother and he the child. ...

‘I don’t want to become sugar; I want to eat it.’ I never feel like saying, ‘I am Brahman.’ I say, ‘Thou art my Lord and I am Thy servant.’ ... My desire is to sing the name and glories of God. ... Further, you see, people speak of the waves as belonging to the Ganges; but no one says that the Ganges belongs to the waves. The feeling, ‘I am He’, is not wholesome. A man who entertains such an idea, while looking on his body as the Self causes himself great harm. He cannot go forward in spiritual life; he drags himself down’ (170–2).

Sri Chaitanya always introduced himself as ‘a servant of the servant of the servant of the feet of the “lord of the gopis”’. Sri Ramakrishna also always considered himself a child or servant of Mother Kali. Similarities in their lives abound. Sri Krishna had revealed himself as Sri Chaitanya to Srimati Radha in a dream.⁷ Sri Ramakrishna as Gadadhar was also revealed to his parents in a dream. Kshudiram Chattopadhyaya, Sri Ramakrishna’s father, had the dream in Gaya, where Sri Chaitanya had his spiritual birth after meeting Ishvara Puri.

Coming from family backgrounds with trad-

itions of study, both of them rejected education as a means of living, albeit in their own ways. Sri Chaitanya first groomed himself as an awesome scholar and then closed his school, while Sri Ramakrishna rejected any formal education, probably building upon Sri Chaitanya's experience. Both married, though the marriage remained only a spiritual relationship.

Sri Chaitanya, the logician, lost himself in the service of his deities. Sri Ramakrishna, grounded in Advaita—impersonal universalism—ritualistically adored the image of Kali. In any case, both transcended all rituals in the intense madness of love divine.

The fire of love, however, was more than what their physical bodies could take. People took them to be possessed by spirits or to be mad. Sri Chaitanya's biographies detail many such instances. Swami Nikhilananda tells us about Sri Ramakrishna:

Sri Ramakrishna ... described to her [Bhairavi Brahmani] his experiences and visions, and told her of people's belief that these were symptoms of madness. She listened to him attentively and said: 'My son, everyone in this world is mad. Some are mad for money, some for creature comforts, some for name and fame; and you are mad for God.' She assured him that he was passing through the almost unknown spiritual experience described in the scriptures as mahabhava, the most exalted rapture of divine love. She told him that this extreme exaltation had been described as manifesting itself through nineteen physical symptoms, including the shedding of tears, a tremor of the body, horripilation, perspiration, and a burning sensation. The Bhakti scriptures, she declared, had recorded only two instances of the experience, namely, those of Sri Radha and Sri Chaitanya. ...

Two famous pundits of the time were invited: Vaishnavcharan, the leader of the Vaishnava society, and Gauri. The first to arrive

was Vaishnavcharan, with a distinguished company of scholars and devotees. The Brahmani, like a proud mother, proclaimed her view before him and supported it with quotations from the scriptures. As the pundits discussed the deep theological question, Sri Ramakrishna, perfectly indifferent to everything happening around him, sat in their midst like a child, immersed in his own thoughts, sometimes smiling, sometimes chewing a pinch of spices from a pouch, or again saying to Vaishnavcharan with a nudge: 'Look here. Sometimes I feel like this, too.' Presently Vaishnavcharan arose to declare himself in total agreement with the view of the Brahmani. He declared that Sri Ramakrishna had undoubtedly experienced mahabhava and that this was the certain sign of the rare manifestation of God in a man. The people assembled there, especially the officers of the temple garden, were struck dumb. Sri Ramakrishna said to Mathur, like a boy: 'Just fancy, he too says so! Well, I am glad to learn that after all it is not a disease' (18–19).

Even great minds like Keshabchandra Sen were intrigued by this *mahabhava*. Sen once said that 'Sri Ramakrishna, Christ, and Sri Chaitanya belonged to a delicate species of humanity that should be kept in a glass case and protected from the vulgar contact of the world' (464). Then, are people like Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna not very relevant to the mundane, vulgar world? Swami Vivekananda differed from Sen: 'Once only a mighty genius rose above the never-ending Avachchhinnas and Avachchedakas [in Nyaya, "the determined" and "the determining attribute"]—Bhagavan Shri Krishna Chaitanya. For once the religious lethargy of Bengal was shaken, and for a time it entered into a communion with the religious life of other parts of India.'⁸

Further, he says that 'Bengal is a land of Bhakti or Bhaktas. The stone on which Chaitanya used to stand in the temple of Jagannath to see the

image was worn by his tears of love and devotion. When he took Sannyasa, he showed his fitness for it to his Guru by keeping sugar on his tongue for some time without its being dissolved. He discovered Vrindaban by the power of insight he had acquired through devotion' (6.123). What was that discovery and how was it novel?

Sri Chaitanya's Movement

We need to go to Sri Chaitanya's Bengal in the crucial first decade of the sixteenth century. He and his close associates had launched the *sankirtana* movement along with a handful of his companions, which also included a Muslim. The *nama-sankirtana* not only brought the fresh air of freedom over mindless ritualism and the net of logic and metaphysics, but it also loosened the grip of caste orthodoxy in society. Swami Vivekananda observed that 'Shankara, Ramanuja had caste considerations, but not Chaitanyadeva, who said "what is caste for a *bhakta*?"'⁹ The vested interests, both from the Hindu orthodoxy and the Muslim administration, joined hands to suppress the new wave by putting a ban on public kirtan. Sri Chaitanya, in defiance of this violation of a fundamental human right of religious expression, brought the kirtan out from Srivasa's courtyard to the streets of Navadwip. Joined by the masses he laid siege to the governor's house through peaceful disobedience. The ban was lifted.

Sri Chaitanya resolved to take his message of love, devotion, and *nama-sankirtana* far and beyond. He took sannyasa in 1509 and moved to the safety of the neighbouring Hindu kingdom of Orissa. But his vision of devotion required a different roadmap.

First and foremost, he needed a team of associates who could translate his intangible vision of Krishna-bhakti into a tangible world of doctrines, literature, arts, architecture, rituals, and other cultural manifestations. He toured the length and

breadth of the country on foot as a mendicant and was able to motivate and enrol such talents as the legendary six Goswamis, Raya Ramananda, Vasudeva Sarvabhauma, and others.

During this long pilgrimage he reached Mathura, the home of his lord, Sri Krishna. Yet, his heart was yearning for Vrindaban, the land of *rasa-lila*. Alas, Vrindaban was not on the memory and map of the Brajamandala geography. He did not give up. He resolved to get what he wanted—the holy abode of Sri Krishna. Being himself the joint incarnation of Srimati Radharani and Sri Krishna, Sri Chaitanya identified an abandoned peninsular area north of Mathura to be the lost *dhama*, holy site. Given the situation—especially the political-military strife going on in that area, where the powers-that-be were no longer Hindu and the area was right on the marching routes of invading armies—saner people like Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, and Vallabhacharya had already chosen to locate their Vrindabans elsewhere in safety. Sri Chaitanya's Vrindaban was in the eye of the storm. During a nine-month-long visit to Braja, he almost lost his life to marauding soldiers. Why this madness? Was he really mad?

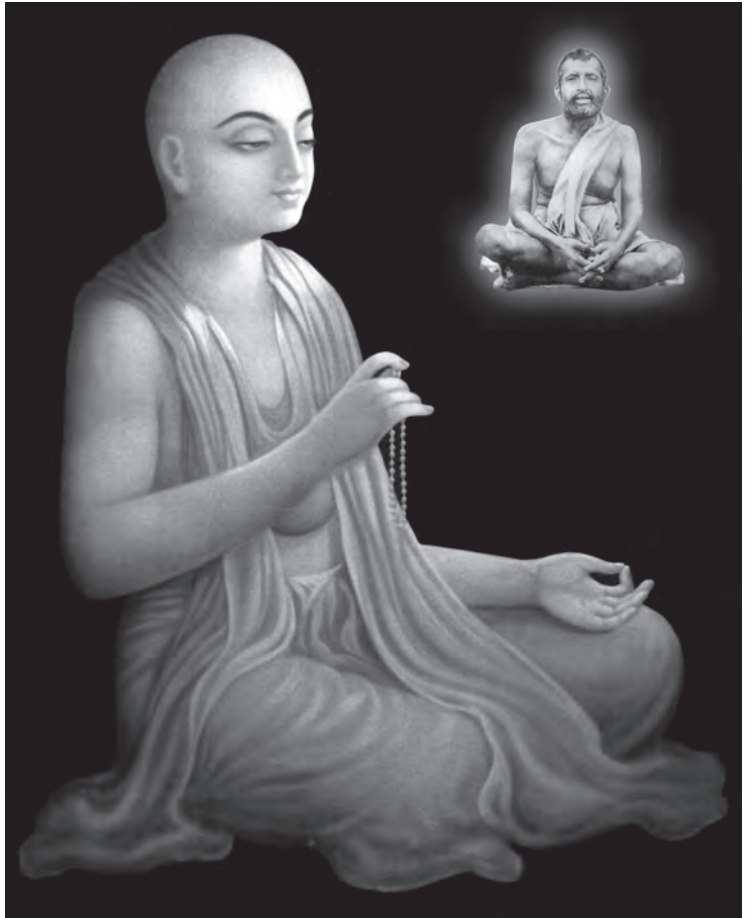
In Braja, and also on the larger Indian canvas, he saw only two ways to meet the situation. Either you confront the 'other' diabolically or engage with them in a dialogue. Chaitanya chose the second—the constructive and inclusive path. It was a political application of his universal love. On his way back and after reaching Puri, where he lived until the end, he organized the enrolment, movement, and settling of his chosen followers in the newly discovered Vrindaban. Led by the six Goswamis, they dedicated themselves to Sri Chaitanya's project of resurrecting Sri Krishna and Vrindaban. Their dialogue with the political powers—both Mughal and Rajput—resulted in the birth of many unique and grand

edifices celebrating the manifestations and pastimes of Sri Krishna and Srimati Radha. Finally, the dialogue encouraged the Grand Mughal Akbar to designate Vrindaban as a settlement and a revenue entity in 1598. In addition to the temples, ghats, and groves, something else was also being produced in Vrindaban.

Sri Chaitanya knew very well that the name, form, lilas, and abode of his dear Lord would not be sustained without an intellectual edifice, the Shastras. Texts were needed to elaborate his system of thought. His dialogue with Raya Ramananda produced a definitive outline of his bhakti doctrine. He found and trained Gopala Bhatta at the Vaishnava centre of Srirangam and moved him to Vrindaban, where he systematized Chaitanya's teachings in a philosophic treatise called *Shat-sandarbha*, besides creating *Haribhaktivilasa*, an encyclopaedic code of conduct for the Vaishnavas. Sanatana, Rupa, Raghunatha Dasa, Jiva, and Raghunatha Bhatta produced the necessary bhakti literature through elaborate commentaries on the Bhagavata, besides definitive works on bhakti as a spiritual and aesthetic discipline, as well as poetry and dramas to re-enliven the pastimes of Sri Krishna. The performing arts got a great boost through *nama-sankirtana*, *pala-kirtana*, *rasa-lila*—for developing this popular dance drama, the Goswamis collaborated with the choreographers from Akbar's court—*samaj*, *sanjhi*, and many other devotional rituals.

The *rasa-mandala*, spiritual artistic realm, of Vrindaban was manifesting itself, thanks to Sri Chaitanya's unique understanding of Ved-

anta. He fully and truly identified the Brahman of Vedanta with *rasa*. Can this aesthetic enjoyment, *rasa*, have a rational logical perspective? For emotionally sensitive bhaktas, absolute experience of *ananda rasa*, mood of bliss, is the goal; and this cannot be enjoyed without a relationship. It is a process that engages two entities, *ashraya* and *vishaya*, the support and the object, *asvadaka* and *asvadya*, the enjoyer and the enjoyed—for our purpose, two humans; hence duality or difference, *dvaita* or *bheda*, is fundamentally presupposed. But any relation is successful only when it unites the different entities by removing alienation; then it seems that non-difference, *advaita* or *abheda*, is fundamental.



There is room for arguing that the mutual dependence of these two categories excludes their ‘reality-in-themselves’. But relation as a fact of experience cannot be explained away as unreal, even if the logic of binary opposites fails to affirm the relation as ‘one whole consisting of difference and non-difference’, although these are contradictory entities like light and darkness, *tamah prakashavat*. When the logic of binary opposites fails, fuzzy relational logic reveals the truth: that relation exhausts itself before the ‘inconceivable logical category of difference in non-difference’: *achintya-bhedabheda-vada*. It resolves the dilemma of the logic of opposites. ‘The other’ is essential for the *sambandhi tattva*, relational principle.

The phenomenon of human relationship is full of variety, but the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition posits the amorous relationship, the relationship between two lovers-in-union, as the highest or sweetest relationship possible in the human arena. It includes and transcends all other forms of human relations—professional, friendly, and filial. This loving union presupposes the transcendence of the separate identities of man and woman, subject and object, me and you, pleasure and pain; the two in love transparently flow into each other, experiencing blissful non-duality, without losing their separate existences. In pure love the motive is only love; it is love for the sake of love. Enjoyment is in being enjoyed. This creates in lovers a reverence for the object of affection and leads to further idealization of that object; it enhances its value and dignity. Love is a dynamic process that seeks self-expansion and a more intense nature.

Vrindaban’s Divine Dance

The emotional geography of Vrindaban, recreated in a novel dialogical way by Sri Chaitanya, was available to Sri Ramakrishna. His singing

and dancing, though grounded in tradition, could not be contained within it. Brahmani, the Sufi Govinda Ray, Totapuri, and others helped him to dance in different religious theatres. Sri Ramakrishna confirms this:

At Vrindavan I myself put on the garb of the Vaishnavas and wore it for fifteen days. ... I have practised the disciplines of all the paths, each for a few days. Otherwise I should have found no peace of mind. ... I have practised all the disciplines; I accept all paths. I respect the Saktas, the Vaishnavas, and also the Vedantists. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern Brahmanjanis.¹⁰

The mystic Bulle Shah agrees: ‘Thus exploded the fire of knowledge. Neither are we Hindu, nor essentially Turk. The Name (of God) is the sanction of love. The lover alone wins over Hari.’

Like Sri Chaitanya, Sri Ramakrishna was also attracted to Srimati Radha and Sri Krishna, to their Name, and especially to their *dhama*, Vrindaban. In 1868 Sri Ramakrishna made a pilgrimage to Vrindaban. During his visit to Nidhuvan, the grove of Radha-Krishna’s amorous pastimes, he met Ganga Mata, who ‘saw’ *mahabhava* oozing from Sri Ramakrishna’s body, Srimati Radharani manifesting through him. In Sri Chaitanya’s Vrindaban, ‘womanhood’ was worshipped for the first time when Srimati Radha’s image was consecrated besides that of Govinda. Srimati Radha was not Sri Krishna’s relative—like Rukmini, Satyabhama, or Subhadra—capable of sharing the throne with him. Neither did she figure in any established list of goddesses. Srimati Radha was the essential *nari*, woman, bound in love with Sri Krishna, who adored her beyond any social obligation and vested interest—in the *parakiya bhava*, ‘illicit’ mood. Love not as give and take, but love and service for the sake of love

and service alone. Such was the pervasive feminism of Sri Chaitanya, that in Vrindaban even Shiva and Brahma were feminine.

Blessed is Vrindaban, where bhakti dances. Among the three—jnana, karma, and bhakti—the last is feminine, because, as a spiritual discipline it requires serving, giving, and loving. In other paths there is more of ‘acquiring’, a male trait. Therefore Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna, who were predominantly ‘feminine’ as manifestations of Sri Radha and Mother Kali, would both perform female roles in religious performances.

But that would make the experience incomplete. In Sri Ramakrishna Mathurmohan Biswas would experience the presence of both—Shiva and Kali. The Bhagavata suggests that in the person of Sri Chaitanya, the manifestation of Sri Hari in the Kali Yuga, Srimati Radha hides Sri Krishna within.¹¹ Sri Ramakrishna reminds us, ‘Sri Chaitanya too worshipped Shakti.’ Rightly so, as Srimati Radha is the primal potency of the Absloute. Rupa Goswami removes all doubts when he declared in the ‘Radhaprakarana’ of the *Ujjvalanilamani* that ‘the Shakti propounded and established in the tantric tradition is Radha.’

In Vrindaban the play was wider. It included not only Shiva and Kali or Radha and Krishna in one body; Sri Chaitanya’s Vrindaban has a powerful temple housing the composite image of Kali and Krishna, near Keshighat. The philosophy of Achintyabhedabheda provided the platform for such deities to emerge and dance in full ritualistic dialogue.

Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Chaitanya were both married. And both took sannyasa for the sake of serving humanity at large. However, both held their wives in utmost respect. Before taking sannyasa, Sri Chaitanya passed on the responsibility of leading and taking care of the bhakta community in his absence to his

wife. Sri Sarada Devi too played a similar role towards the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. After Sri Ramakrishna’s *mahasamadhi* in 1886 she went to Vrindaban along with a small group of close devotees. Sri Ramakrishna’s ways are unique. He wanted Sri Sarada Devi to drown in the *bhava* of Srimati Radha in that state of separation. Like the gopis of Braja, Sri Sarada Devi shone forth as gold. She would visit the temples—including those of Radharaman and Banke-bihari—and the river Yamuna at Vrindaban. After a year the devotees took her back to Calcutta. In Vrindaban Swami Yoganada was fortunate to become her first initiate. The organization of Sri Ramakrishna’s followers had Sri Sarada Devi’s blessings. The intense love for Vrindaban forced her to return there in 1895 for a couple of months. She said: ‘Coming here [to Vamshi-vata] I can hear the sound of the gopis’ anklets; they come to see Sri Govinda even today. On coming here I have great joy, I feel like lying down in the holy dust of Vrindaban for the rest of my life.’¹²

This was also Sri Ramakrishna’s feeling: ‘When I went to Vrindavan I felt no desire to return to Calcutta. ... I felt an intense desire to live at Vrindavan. But just then I remembered my mother. That completely changed everything. She was old. I said to myself: “My devotion to God will take to its wings if I have to worry about my mother. I would rather live with her. Then I shall have peace of mind and be able to meditate on God”.’¹³ This was very much like Sri Chaitanya, who would always say that Mathura-Vrindaban was his favourite place on earth; yet he settled at Puri instead of Vrindaban in keeping with his mother’s wish. In devotion to their mothers both sacrificed their own wishes. However, Sri Ramakrishna transported a bit of the physical Vrindaban to Dakshineswar. He brought some soil from Braja, scattered a portion of it in the

Panchavati, buried the rest in the little hut where he had practised meditation, and declared, 'Now this place is as sacred as Vrindavan' (36).

After some time Sri Ramakrishna went to Navadvip and Kalna to 'meet' Sri Chaitanya. But it is interesting to note that he refused to visit Gaya and Puri, sites where Sri Chaitanya had *bhava samadhi*, saying that were he to go there, he would in all probability be merged in Vishnu, the presiding deity, and not be able to return to his body. Rightly so, Sri Chaitanya also used to always have darshan of Jagannath from the furthest distance. Only once he moved near, and he did not come back.

In the last years of his life, Sri Ramakrishna enthusiastically participated in the Panihati festival. There his concern was to find out a way to inculcate spirituality in 'young Bengal'. He said: 'It will be sufficient for the youngsters who come here if they know only two things. If they know these, they will not have to practise much discipline and austerity. First, who I am, and second, who they are. Many of the youngsters belong to the inner circle. Those belonging to the inner circle will not attain liberation. I shall have to assume a human body again, in a northwesterly direction' (829). Swamis Vivekananda, Brahmananda, and many others passed through Vrindaban, the land of love and service. Sri Chaitanya's teaching of 'taste for the divine name, compassion for living beings, and service of humanity' was always emphasized by Sri Ramakrishna. His disciples put this into practice, and the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashramas are the most visible proof of love in the service of humanity. Narayana to be served in the poor, *daridra narayana*, and the sick, *rogi narayana*. Sri Ramakrishna always drew strength from the life of Sri Chaitanya. He would say, 'Read books of devotion like the *Bhagavata* or the life of Chaitanya' (281). He was moved by his spirit when he sang:

Behold the waves of Gora's ecstatic love;
Under them all the universe lies submerged!
And in his love I, too, long to be drowned.
O friend, Gauranga's love has swallowed me;
Who else feels for our misery like Gauranga,
Dragging us from the mire of worldliness? (501).

All glory to Sri Chaitanya and Sri Ramakrishna—one spirit two bodies, one dance two dancers!



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Sri Ramakrishna and Sikhism

Dr Vanita

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S INTERACTION with Sikhs is very significant for both Hinduism and Sikhism. This interaction has been discussed by Swami Prabhananda in *More about Ramakrishna* in an able and scholarly manner.

The Soldiers' Attraction for the Sadhu of Dakshineswar

At Barrackpore near Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna lived, was stationed a nine-hundred strong Sikh contingent. It is on record that many Sikh soldiers in groups visited Sri

Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar from time to time and had discussions with him. Sri Ramakrishna also visited them once in their barracks. He thus became aware of Sikh history and exchanged views about religion, God, and various teachings of the Sikh faith. Sri Ramakrishna once visited a gurdwara called *Bara Sikh Sangat* in Calcutta. A Sikh soldier called Koar Singh was highly devoted to him and often discussed philosophical issues with him. In this way Sri Ramakrishna became conscious about the Guru Granth Sahib and the *janam sakhis*, life stories, written about the life of Guru Nanak. The Sikh soldiers were delighted to see in Sri Ramakrishna the signs of holiness, for they had read the 'Sukhmani' of Guru Arjun which speaks of such sages:

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He who preacheth to others
 what he doth not practise
 Shall be born and die again in unending lives.
 But in whose heart
 the Formless One indwelleth
 Shall save the world by his teaching.
 Only those, Lord, who have won Thy Love
 Have grasped Thee truly.
 Nanak is prostrate at the feet of such Seers.¹

Sri Ramakrishna had interacted with some *nanak panthi* sadhus in Dakshineswar and also during his visit to Varanasi. These sadhus were aware about the Bhagavadgita and other classical texts. Swami Prabhananda has also mentioned that once Sri Ramakrishna shared some anecdotes about Malik Bhago and Bhai Lalo from a *sakhi* of Guru Nanak with his Marwari devotees. Sri Ramakrishna quotes Guru Nanak: 'I was about to eat the food of unholy people, when I found it stained with blood' (71).

Antidote for Scepticism and Violence

Mahatma Gandhi said:

Ramakrishna was a living embodiment of godliness. His sayings are not those of a mere learned man but they are pages from the Book of Life. They are revelations of his own experiences. They, therefore, leave on the reader an impression which he cannot resist. In this age of scepticism Ramakrishna presents an example of a bright and living faith which gives solace to thousands of men and women who would otherwise have remained without spiritual light.²

There was a similar scepticism in the age of Guru Nanak and his message too was a solace to thousands of men and women. This is, in fact, true not just of Guru Nanak's message, but of the whole of Guru Granth Sahib.

Sri Ramakrishna was established in ahimsa, non-injury, and the message of the Guru Granth Sahib is also one of ahimsa with a social conscious-

ness and spiritual radiance. Guru Nanak says:

*Jisu manu manai abhimanu
 na ta kau himsa lobhu visare;
 Sahji ravai varu kamani pir
 ki gurmukhi rangi savare.*

One whose mind is pleased and appeased has no egoistical pride. Violence and greed are forgotten. The soul-bride is intuitively enchanted and enjoys her Husband Lord, as Gurmukh; she is embellished by his love.³

It is not easy to be established full in ahimsa. Sant Paramananda warns us:

*Himsa tau man te nahi chhuti
 jia daia nahi pali.*

Cruelty has not left your mind; you have not cherished kindness for other living beings (1253).

Spiritual Knowledge

Sri Ramakrishna had gone through the whole gamut of religious paths including the *madhura bhava*, that espouses the metaphor of conjugal relationship with God. In Guru Granth Sahib also this is a central theme:

*Horu birha sabh dhatu hai
 jab lagu sahib priti na hoi.*

All other loves are transitory, as long as people do not love their Lord and Master.

*Ihu manu maia mohia vekhanu sunanu na hoi;
 Sah dekhe binu priti na upajai andha kia karei;
 Nanak jini akhi litia soi sacha dei.*

This mind is enticed by maya—it cannot see or hear. Without seeing the Husband Lord, love does not well up in her; what can the blind person do? O Nanak, the True One who takes away the eyes of spiritual wisdom—He alone can restore them (83).

Sri Ramakrishna experienced *nirvikalpa samadhi*, where 'knowledge, knower, and known

dissolve in the menstroom of One Eternal Consciousness; birth, growth, and death vanish in that infinite Existence; and love, lover, and beloved merge in that unbounded ocean of Supreme Felicity quelling all doubts and misgivings.⁴ The concept of *nirvikalpa samadhi* is not explicated in the Guru Granth Sahib or in other important Sikh texts, but knowledge is defined in a similar manner:

*Dekhou bhai gyan ki ai andhi;
Sabbhai udani bhram
ki tati rahai na maia bandhi.*

Behold, O siblings of destiny, the storm of spiritual wisdom has come. It has totally blown away the thatched huts of doubt, and torn apart the bonds of maya.⁵

*Hari-gianu prachandu balia ghati
chananu ghar mandar sohaia;
Tanu manu arapi sigar banae
hari prabh sache bhaia.*

Spiritual wisdom burns brilliantly, illuminating the heart; their homes and temples are embellished and blessed. I have made my body and mind into adornments and dedicated them to the True Lord God, pleasing Him (775).

While discussing the nature of Brahman with Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramakrishna said: 'Brahman is beyond both Vidya and Avidya. He is beyond Maya. Brahman cannot be defined by words. The Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, and all the six philosophies—everything has been defiled by being uttered by the mouth. Only one thing has not been defiled. It is Brahman. No one has yet been able to say what Brahman is.'⁶ In the Guru Granth Sahib a true *brahmajnani*, knower of Brahman, has been thus described by Guru Amar Das:

*Brahamu bindahi te brahamana
je chalahi satiguru bhai;*

*Jin kai hirdai hari vasai haumai rogu gavai;
Gun ravahi gun sangrahabi joti joti milai;
Isu jug mahi virle brahaman
brahamu bindahi chitu layi.*

He alone knows God, and he alone is a brahmana, who walks in harmony with the will of the true Guru. One whose heart is filled with the Lord is freed of egotism and disease; he chants the Lord's praises, gathers virtue, and his light merges into the Light. How rare are those brahmanas who, in this age, come to know God, by lovingly focusing their consciousness on Him.⁷

*Braham giani nirmal te nirmala,
jaise mailu na lagai jala;
Braham giani kai mani hoi pragasu,
jaiso dhar upari akasu;
Braham giani kai mitra satru samani,
brahama giani kai nahi abhiman;
Braham giani uch te ucha,
mani apne hai saba te nicha;
Braham giani se jan bhae,
nanak jin prabhu api karei.*

The God-conscious being, is the purest of the pure, akin to water untouched by dirt. The God-conscious being's mind is enlightened, like the sky above the earth. To the God-conscious being, friend and foe are the same. The God-conscious being has no egotistic pride. The God-conscious being is the highest of the high; (yet) within his own mind, he is the humblest of all.

I have practised all kinds of sadhana: jnanayoga, karmayoga, and bhaktiyoga. I have even gone through the exercises of hathayoga to increase longevity. There is another Person dwelling in this body. Otherwise, after attaining samadhi, how could I live with the devotees and enjoy the love of God? Koar Singh used to say to me: 'I have never before seen a person who has returned from the plane of samadhi. You are none other than Nanak.'

—The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 832–3

They alone become God-conscious beings, O Nanak, whom God Himself makes so (272).

Workings of the Ego

Sri Ramakrishna was completely devoid of egoism, which is *avidya*, ignorance, a hindrance to divine knowledge. In the Guru Granth Sahib ego is a negative concept. The egoist is *manmukh*, and the person devoid of egotism is *gurmukh*, a being conscious of love, compassion, devotion, and other spiritual verities. The Guru Granth Sahib says this about the ego:

*He janam maran mulam
ahamkaram papatma;
Mitram tajanti satram dridanti
anik maya bistirnah;
Avant javant thakant jia
dukh sukh bahu bhognah;
Bhram bhayan udian ramanam
maha bikat asadh rognah;
Baidayam parabrahm pamesvar
aradhi nanak hari hari hare.*


O egotism, you are the root of birth and death and the cycle of reincarnation; you are the very soul of sin. You forsake friends, and hold tight to enemies. You spread out countless illusions of maya. You cause the living beings to come and go until they are exhausted. You lead them to experience pain and pleasure. You lead them to wander lost in the terrible wilderness of doubt; you lead them to contract the most

horrible, incurable diseases. The only physician is the Supreme Lord, the transcendent Lord God. Nanak worships and adores the Lord, Har, Har, Hare (1358).

Moreover, as Guru Arjun Dev says:

*Agiani manukhu bhaia jo nahi so lorai;
Raini andhari karia kavan jugati jitu bhorai.
Bhramato bhramato haria
anik bidhi kari torai;
Kahu nanak kirapa bhai
sadhsangati nidhi morai.*

Humanity is in spiritual ignorance; people see things that do not exist. The night is dark and gloomy; how will the morning dawn? Wandering, wandering all around, I have grown weary; trying all sorts of things, I have been searching. Says Nanak, He has shown mercy to me, I have found the treasure of the *sat sangat*, the company of the holy (212).

In this way we find some remarkable correspondences between Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and the message of the Guru Granth Sahib. Sri Ramakrishna gave these philosophic, ethical, and spiritual teachings in simple language, and in the Guru Granth Sahib, the main scripture of Sikhism, we have all the discourses in poetic form. The message of Guru Nanak is also available in the *janam sakhi* and other Sikh texts. In this age of scepticism we find both these set of teachings removing doubts and preparing a common ground for bringing people together. 

He [Sri Ramakrishna] said to the Marwaris: 'You see, one can't strictly adhere to truth in business. There are ups and downs in business. Nanak once said, "I was about to eat the food of unholy people, when I found it stained with blood." A man should offer only pure things to holy men. He shouldn't give them food earned by dishonest means.'

—The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 162

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Sri Ramakrishna's Sufi Sadhana

Maulana Mubarak Karim Jawahar

SWAMI SARADANANDA WRITES in *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* that though Sri Ramakrishna performed sadhana under many gurus, 'we, however, heard him often mention only the names of three such teachers—the Bhairavi Brahmani, the "naked" Tota Puri and the Muslim Govinda. The Master mentioned but rarely the names of other teachers, though he learnt from them the methods of spiritual practice according to other Hindu denominations.'¹ According to *Sri Ramakrishna Parikrama* by Kalijiban Debsharma and *Amritarupa Sri Ramakrishna* by Swami Prabhananda, Govinda Roy was named Wajid Ali Khan after he converted to Islam.²

Who Is a Sufi?

A Sufi is a mystic. A Sufi loves God passionately and wants to be possessed by God. The Sufi's sole desire in life is to dissolve oneself in God's love—nothing less will give satisfaction.

The Holy Quran is the fountainhead of Sufi spirituality. Through graded spiritual exercises in conformity with the teachings of the Holy Quran, Sufis attempt to have a direct and personal experience of God. Though they often ad-

dress God as *malik*, master, they do not restrict the Creator-created relationship to the category of *malik-banda*, master and servant alone. To them Allah is their beloved, not a mere master.

Hazrat Abu Zar al-Ghifari (R) (d.652/653) was one of the first propounders of Sufism. Hazrat Zun Nun Misri (R) (796–860/1) spread Sufism in Egypt. Sheikh Hussain Zinjani and Abul Hasan Al Hujwiri (d. after 1089) were among the first to introduce Sufism in northwest India, while Shah Sultan Rumi (R) is reputed to have done so in east India. Hujwiri is reported to have reached Lahore in 1035 CE and Rumi is said to have come to Bengal in 1053 CE.

Sufis do not attach much importance to observance of rituals. They strive to keep their mind free from worldly attachments and remain focused on *zikr*, devout recital of the holy name, contemplation, and meditation.

Divergent spiritual practices resulted in various religious orders within the folds of Sufism—Chishtiyya, Qadiriyya, Suhrawardiyya, and Naqshbandiyya. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, the founder of the Chishtiyya order in India, deserves a special mention. His dargah at Ajmer is a popular place of pilgrimage for Hindus and Muslims alike. The Sufi sadhakas belonging to the Chishtiyya order prefer to lead a celibate life. They seek to feel the presence of God through collective singing of devotional songs or *qawwali* that leads to ecstatic dances.

The spiritual practices of the Qadiriyyas largely resemble that of the Chishtiyyas. However, the Qadiriyyas emphasize *zikr*, while the Chishtiyyas express their love for Allah through fervent

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songs and frenzied dances. The Suhrawardiyyas also use music in their spiritual practices. Murshidi songs in honour of the *murshid*, the human being chosen by Allah to give spiritual lessons to the aspirants, are popular among them. But the Naqshbandiyyas do not use music to seek Allah. They prefer to lead the life of wandering ascetics. They always carry a pilgrim's staff in their hand, and collecting shreds of coloured cloth from the holy shrines they visit, tie them on the staff. These relics remind them of the Sufi saints whose mausoleums they have visited. But one point must be clearly remembered: Though the Sufis revere the saints, they neither worship nor offer prayers to them. Rather, they ask the saints to pray to Allah for them. The saints are human beings who are close to Allah. So the Sufi sadhakas ask the saints to intercede and seek spiritual favours from Allah on their behalf. When the Sufis take the name of a saint, they pray in the same breath: '*Rahamatullah alaihe*; may Allah be pleased with him or her'. This is the reason that the first letter of this prayer 'R' is written within brackets after the names of the saints.

Practising Sufi Sadhana

The Sufis seek the consummation of their love in mystic union with 'the beloved'. Sri Ramakrishna was one such saint who entered and remained steadfast in the state of *baqa*—a ceaseless state of existence in Allah. The Holy Quran instructs Muslims: '*Faz-kuruni az-kurkum*; therefore remember Me, I will remember you.'³ The life of Sri Ramakrishna is a living commentary on this sacred command. He sought, practised, and remained steadfast to Truth. He experienced, relished, and assimilated the essence of scriptures in his life. He understood the futility of mere intellectual understanding of the scriptures. He was aware that one must have direct and personal experience of what God has revealed and

recorded in the scriptures and only then would one be able to apply it in everyday life. Therefore, he wanted to learn the truth of Islam. "“This also”, thought he, “is a path to the realization of God; the sportive Mother, the source of infinite Lila, has been blessing many people with the attainment of Her lotus feet through this path also. I must see how people taking refuge in Her are led along this path to the fulfilment of their spiritual aspirations.””⁴ His scientific attitude towards religious experiences made him set foot on the path of God as stipulated in the Holy Quran.

Allah is gracious to those pure hearts who seek him with love and devotion. Allah had already sent the wandering monk Syed Wajid Ali Shah to the temple garden at Dakshineswar. 'Just like Hindu Sannyasins, Muslim Fakirs too were welcome at Rasmani's Kali temple, and the hospitality of the temple was equally accorded to both of them' (ibid.). Consequently, he did not have to spend time seeking alms to maintain his body and could uninterruptedly devote himself to spiritual exercises. Also within the temple premises, but not inside the temple courtyard, was an ancient tree, the seat of Ghazi Pir. Sri Ramakrishna felt attracted to Wajid Ali and became his disciple.

Before embracing Islam, Syed Wajid Ali lived in Dum Dum and was named Govinda Ray. Swami Saradananda refers to him by his pre-conversion Hindu name (298–300) or as 'Muslim Govinda' (534, 620). About him Swami Saradananda writes:

Hriday told us that he was a Kshatriya by birth. He was perhaps learned in Persian and Arabic. Having studied various religious doctrines and come in contact with different religious communities, he was at last attracted by the liberal doctrine of Islam and was formally initiated into it. Govinda, thirsting for truth, accepted the Islamic faith ... engaged himself ardently in the reading of the Koran and in the religious

practices prescribed by that scripture. Govinda was an ardent lover of God. ... The Master was attracted towards the devout Govinda, and happening to converse with him, was charmed with Govinda's sincere faith and his love for God (299).

This ascetic Syed Wajid Ali belonged to the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiya order of Sufis. Before coming to Dakshineswar in 1866, he had been already endowed with the status of a *pir* and had received the authority to initiate others into Sufism. The Sufis, irrespective of the order to which they belong, live a God-intoxicated life. But the aspirants belonging to the Naqshbandiyya order practise a spiritual discipline that resembles the *sadhana* of the Hindu yogis in many ways. The Naqshbandiyyas invoke Allah to take His seat at different locations within their bodies. This mystic act of invocation requires mastering the art of controlling breath, blood circulation, and certain other vital functions of the internal organs. For any novice it will take a minimum of twelve years to master these techniques of physical and mental control, a feat that Sri Ramakrishna accomplished in just three days!

The aim of the Naqshbandiyyas is to attain the realization '*Anal-Haq*; my true self is Truth' and remain steadfast to it. The Sufis belonging to this order attempt to dissolve their ego in the 'great ocean of truth', which is nothing other than Allah. Indeed, Allah is Gracious. Sri Ramakrishna got a spiritual instructor who made him perform tasks that perfectly suited his attitude and mentality.

Swami Saradananda writes that during these three days Sri Ramakrishna abstained from entering the Kali temple and did not feel inclined even to think of Hindu deities (299–300). We do not doubt it for it is a well-known fact that whenever Sri Ramakrishna would undertake a particular type of spiritual discipline, he would practise it in its totality with all its idio-

The Master use to describe his mentality when he practised Islamic Sadhana, as follows: 'Then I used to repeat the name of Allah, wear my cloth in the fashion of the Mohammedans, and recite the Namaz regularly. All Hindu ideas being wholly banished from the mind, not only did I not salute the Hindu Gods but I had no inclination even for visiting them. After passing three days in that way, I realised the goal of that form of devotion.'

—*Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 271

syncrasies. This would also imply that he must have abstained from singing devotional songs during this period.

Some biographers suggest that Sri Ramakrishna wanted to taste beef during this period, though he could not do it. It must, however, be noted that eating beef has nothing to do with Islam. Even a vegetarian may be a good Muslim. But a Muslim must offer *namaz* five times a day. Therefore, it is not clear why Swami Saradananda wrote that Sri Ramakrishna would offer *namaz* thrice daily (299). Though the exact timings of the *namaz* depend on the particular season, it is offered at dawn, *fajr*, midday, *zuhr*, dusk, *asr*, evening, *maghrib*, and night, *isha*. To the Sufis, the spirit of the *namaz* matters more than the rituals involved.

Before starting the prayers the devout Muslim washes oneself (*wuzu*) with water, a precious gift from Allah. While cleaning the hands a Muslim contemplates: 'May these hands which have been cleansed by Your water do only what You want me to do.' Then, water is sprinkled over the face, including lips, eyes, ears, nostrils, and the forehead. While doing so a Muslim contemplates: 'I am washing my eyes with Your water. May I, from now onwards only see what is good in the people who come in contact with me. I am rinsing my lips with Your water. May no abusive word or untruth

defile my lips which I have cleansed with Your gift. I am wetting my ear with Your water. May I hear only what is good for me and ignore bad advice. I am touching my nostrils with Your water. May these nostrils continue to inhale and exhale Your air. May it relish the sweet fragrance caused by Your presence in everything that is around me.' Finally, the feet are rinsed with water. While doing so, the devout Muslim contemplates thus: 'I am using Your precious gift to clean my feet. May my feet never carry me to places where You do not want me to go. May I utilize these feet for pilgrimage, and so on.' Thus the ritual gestures of physical cleansing become sublime acts of self-offering.

After the purification rites are completed, a Muslim stands with palms joined, necks and shoulders reverently bent for *takbir*, taking Allah's

name. This is the way the angels stand in front of Allah. At this moment, the Sufi meditates: 'Along with the angels in heaven, here on earth I stand. I am not worthy of seeing Allah but I can feel his gaze on me. I cannot look up at him but he, my beloved and my master, is graciously looking down at me. His benevolent gaze is touching me.'

Then, they recite some sura, verses, from the Holy Quran as per their choice. Just as rain water seeps through dry parched soil, Sufis experience the word of Allah filling them to the brim. The feelings vary depending on the context of the verses uttered. One may experience deep joy leading to ecstasy or a sense of awe compelling them to seek refuge in the Lord. The Naqshbandiyyas prefer verses that describe the diverse attributes of Allah. Afterwards, they meditate intensely on any one of these attributes. At this

stage, in some cases, those divine qualities manifest in the person of the Sufi.

Then, they bend their body down to resemble the posture of animals, *ruku*. Both palms are placed on the knees and the back is kept parallel to the ground. This is to acknowledge the unity of all living creatures that Allah has created. The Sufis feel that animals also pray to Allah and that is why this animal-like posture follows the angel-like posture.⁵

Ruku is followed by *sajda*. The devotees touch the ground with their forehead, palms, knees, and toes and experience that the entire Creation from angels to insects is all an offering of ven-

Ghazitala in Dakshineswar, where Sri Ramakrishna practised Islamic sadhana



eration to their common Creator. The last part of the namaz is the *munajat*, petitionary prayer. The devotee asks Allah to fulfil the material and spiritual needs of their own and their dear ones. But Sufis mostly pray for the well-being of others. Thus, the prayer of petition is transformed into a prayer of intercession.

Swami Saradananda writes: 'The Master said, "I then repeated the holy syllable "Allah" with great devotion."' ⁶ The Bengali text reads: '*Allah mantra jap*'. By this phrase the biographer could be referring to *zikr* or the continuous repetition of the holy name, a basic spiritual practice of all Sufi orders. The Sufis chant incessantly: '*La ilaha illallah*'; there is no god but Allah.' ⁷ As the chanting grows fervent it condenses into *illallah* and finally into *Allah* alone. While the other sects confine this chanting to their tongues, the Naqshbandiyyas blend it with the rhythm of their heartbeat; as the heart throbs, it utters the holy name of Allah incessantly without conscious effort. Probably this is what Swami Saradananda meant by the *japa* of the Allah mantra. However, it could also refer to a practice common to all Sufi sects: the recital of the ninety-nine names of Allah using the sacred garland of beads or *tasbeeh*.

In the Holy Quran Allah is addressed by ninety-nine different names. Each of these names denotes an attribute of Allah. For instance, 'Rahman' means 'the merciful', while 'Qahhar' means 'the strict judge'. When undertaken at specified times and in specific numbers the recital of these holy names, while turning the crystal beads of the *tasbeeh*, is guaranteed to bring material benefits. But the Sufis never do it for any mundane gain; they do it because they enjoy calling their beloved by different names. It gives them great joy to recollect the diverse attributes of Allah, who they know is beyond all attributes. Sri Ramakrishna could well have received a *tasbeeh* from his *murshid*, for his fascination for var-

iety is well known. If this be true, then he must have relished the recital of the ninety-nine designations of Allah, knowing well that in reality Allah is beyond all description. Naqshbandiyyas cover their heads while praying. Sri Ramakrishna must also have done so.

The Shajra of Sri Ramakrishna

Both Sri Ramakrishna and his *murshid* Syed Wajid Ali broke away from the bondage of their gross physical body. The mentor physically outlived his disciple, for he passed away on 11 November 1919. His remains are interred in Gobra, Kolkata. ⁸ His descendants now live in Bangladesh, where the Naqshbandiyyas have two *khanqahs*, retreats, at Dhaka and Khulna.

Sufism gives great importance to spiritual lineage. One needs to be initiated in order to overcome the ego. Through the *murshid*'s prayers of intercession, the disciple receives *marifa*, the knowledge of God. This assists the disciple to attain the state of *fana*, dissolution of the ego. By the grace of Allah, which operates through the *murshid*, the disciple stands on the shoulders of his mentor and inherits the spiritual treasures of the *murshid*. If Allah so wishes, one may also attain the state of *baqa*, where one remains dissolved in Allah. At this stage, if Allah commands the *murshid*, he confers the status of *pir*, saint, on his disciple. Thus, spiritual lineage is one of the many ways through which Allah's grace keeps flowing.

In Bengal the most senior saint of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya order is Hazrat Sheikh Hamid Danishmand Bangali (d.1653) (R). His body is enjoying its eternal rest in the village of Mangalkot in the Burdwan district. In his *shajra*, lineage, was Hazrat Sufi Fateh Ali Shah (R) who initiated Syed Wajid Ali. According to this *shajra*, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa belongs to the house of Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya. On the basis of this glorious spiritual inheritance,

Sri Ramakrishna is undoubtedly a *murshid* of the Muslims.

The monks of the Ramakrishna order belong to the Puri order of Hindu Dashanami sadhus as Sri Ramakrishna was initiated by Tota Puri. The spiritual realization that took Tota Puri forty years to attain Sri Ramakrishna attained in a few days. By the same logic and precedence, the monks of the Ramakrishna order may advance their claim to belong to the Islamic order of Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya as well.

Islam does not admit the doctrine of incarnation. Therefore, though the Sufis have no reservations to proclaim that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna will lead us to Allah, they do not regard Sri Ramakrishna as 'God becoming man'. A Muslim can accept Sri Ramakrishna as *murshid* without considering him an incarnation or prophet.

The Seer of a Grand Union

Swami Vivekananda and his brother disciples have always welcomed the meeting of Hinduism and Islam on the basis of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices. In this context, Swami Saradananda writes: 'The Master used to say, "There is, as it were, a mountain of difference between them. Their thoughts and faiths, actions and behaviour, have remained quite unintelligible to each other in spite of their living together for so long a time." Does the practise of Islam by the Master, the divine incarnation of the age, indicate that the said difference would some day disappear and both the Hindus and the Muslims would embrace one another in love?'⁹

Swami Vivekananda wrote: 'I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body.'¹⁰ We hear in him the voice of his guru, the voice that incessantly chanted the sacred name of Allah for three days.

Let us conclude with a prayer that Sri Ramakrishna must have learnt from his guru:

Utter, Allah is one without a second
Allah is the refuge of all;
Allah neither begets nor is begotten
No one is equal to Allah.¹¹



Notes and References

1. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 534.
2. Kalijiban Debsharma and Devotees, *Sri Ramakrishna Parikrama*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Sri Balaram, 2003), 1.108; Swami Prabhananda, *Amritarupa Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1398 BE), 52; see also Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 85, and Nirmalkumar Ray, *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Samsparshe* (Kolkata: Dey's, 1410 BE), 172.
3. Quran, 2.152.
4. *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 299.
5. The Sufis have friendly feeling towards all creatures, including animals. One of the rites of hajj involves sacrifice of a hoofed animal. Most Sufis avoid it. They donate the money that would have been spent on buying animals, to charitable institutions. The Sufis celebrate Bakr-Id through namaz and other pious observances but avoid animal sacrifices.
6. *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 299.
7. Quran, 37.35.
8. A memorial erected at this place is looked after by Syed Muhammad Mustaqin Siddiqui, a Naqshbandiyya Sufi and the grand disciple of Syed Wajid Ali Shah. The memorial is called Wajidiya Darbar Sharif and is located at 9/1, Ram-mohan Bera Lane, Gobra-1, Kolkata 700 046. A plaque on the wall of this memorial contains an Arabic inscription where the time of Syed Wajid Ali Shah's (R) death is given as 5.00 p.m., 11 November 1919; 17 Safar 1338 Hijr. The remains of Syed Wajid Ali Shah's (R) son and daughter are also interred in front of his tomb.
9. *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 366.
10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 6.416.
11. Quran, 112.1-4.

Ramakrishna, Christ, and Divine Incarnation

Father Paul Dupuis

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN Ramakrishna and Christianity is a subject that promises to offer a rich mine for exploration. From the depths of his God-consciousness and God-intoxication that transcends time, place, and causation Ramakrishna experienced a truth that became his core teaching: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' The Master understood that materialism and scepticism were chipping at the foundations of religion. The time for religions to be pitting against one another was passé; moreover, they had seemingly lost their capacity to bring souls into communion with God. In his boundless love and universal vision, what mattered to Ramakrishna was that *all* people—Hindus, Christians, Muslims, humanists, agnostics, or atheists—should experience God for themselves. Religions would cease to be divisive when practitioners experienced their oneness with God. The devotees will realize that their true nature is God, Atman, that it is free and blissful, pure and luminous, eternal and infinite, and identical with Brahman. Then, the various religious paths that men follow will lead them to God, to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

What principally mattered to Ramakrishna was God, and he considered religion as an indispensable, though secondary, means. God is One, whereas religions are many. Furthermore, each



Sri Ramakrishna had a spiritual experience while contemplating at this image of Mary and Jesus

religion has within it various different paths: the path of unselfish work, karma yoga; the path of knowledge, jnana yoga; the path of meditation, raja yoga; and the popular path of loving devotion, bhakti yoga. The various paths are suited to the temperament of each believer and are thus useful. Therefore, what could be gained by trying to prove that any path is superior or more absolute than the other?

Ramakrishna Experiences Christ

In this perspective it would seem more natural to speak of Ramakrishna in his relationship to Christ as a divine incarnation, rather than to Christianity as a religion. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* contains 1,062 pages, yet less than four of them speak about Christianity. Ramakrishna had little contact with Christianity, but he did have the profoundest imaginable experience of Christ. Not a theoretical grasping of concepts, doctrines, or dogmas, but a mystical merging of

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the Divine Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, in him. Ramakrishna's sadhanas culminated in experiencing the goal of various religions, including Islam. Though he did not practise Christianity as is prescribed in this religion, a sublime and most extraordinary encounter with Jesus took place, as could only occur in a soul as pure as Ramakrishna's—so pure that men and women felt purified when they came into his presence.

The first such 'meeting' between Ramakrishna and Christ is recorded by Mahendranath Gupta, 'M', who wrote a detailed account of it in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, a work for which we will be eternally grateful:

One day he was seated in the parlour of Jadu Mallick's garden house at Dakshineswar, when his eyes became fixed on a painting of the Madonna and Child. Intently watching it, he became gradually overwhelmed with divine emotion. The figures in the picture took on life, and the rays of light emanating from them entered his soul. ... In dismay he cried out, 'O Mother! What are you doing to me?' And, breaking through the barriers of creed and religion, he entered a new realm of ecstasy. Christ possessed his soul.¹

Four days later, while he was walking in the Panchavati,

he saw coming toward him a person with beautiful large eyes, serene countenance, and fair skin. As the two faced each other, a voice rang out in the depths of Sri Ramakrishna's soul: 'Behold the Christ, who shed His heart's blood for the redemption of the world, who suffered a sea of anguish for love of men. It is He, the Master Yogi, who is in eternal union with God. It is Jesus, Love Incarnate.' The Son of Man embraced the Son of the Divine Mother and merged in him. Sri Ramakrishna realized his identity with Christ. ... Till the last moment of his life he believed that Christ was an Incarnation of God (34).

Similarities in Their Lives

Both Ramakrishna and Christ were born in countries occupied by powerful empires: Israel was occupied by the Romans and India by the British. Both were born into poor families. Ramakrishna's father Kshudiram lost his home and property to a greedy landlord, while Joseph, a carpenter, fled to Egypt with Jesus born in a manger, to protect the child from a murderous king. Both were conceived under heavenly circumstances. Kshudiram went on pilgrimage to Gaya and offered worship at the feet of Gadadhara, a name of Vishnu. In a dream he saw his ancestors in luminous celestial bodies accepting his offerings and blessing him. Overflowing with devotion he found that the temple was filled with divine light. A Divine Being was 'looking at Kshudiram with benign, affectionate eyes, He beckoned him ... and addressed him thus in a sweet voice, "Kshudiram, your extraordinary devotion has made me very happy; I bless you. I will be born as your son and will receive your loving care."² While Ramakrishna's father was away, his mother Chandramani Devi felt a bright beam of divine effulgence from a Shiva temple enter into and overwhelm her. Later when she related this to her husband, both were convinced that they would be blessed with a divine child.

Christ too was conceived in a celestial way. Holy Mary became pregnant without knowing her husband Joseph. The Archangel Gabriel appeared to the young virgin of Nazareth as she was praying. The angel greeted Mary and said: 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.' Then he told her: 'Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest.' The angel continued: 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow

thee; therefore also that holy thing that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.’³

The young Gadadhara—Ramakrishna’s childhood name—astonished scholars with the correct answer to a complicated theological dispute during a *shraddha* ceremony. Jesus, when he was twelve years old, also participated in a discussion among doctors in the Temple of Jerusalem: ‘All that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers’ (2.47). Both experienced transfiguration. One day while Ramakrishna was uttering ‘the Mantra “Rang”, sprinkled water all round himself ... he actually saw an impassable wall of fire with hundreds of tongues spread out, protecting the place of worship from all obstacles. ... The other Brahmins, seeing his mind quite absorbed and body shining all over with a resplendent lustre, said to one another, “It is as if Vishnu Himself has assumed a human body and has sat down to worship.”’⁴ Jesus was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John on what is traditionally said to be Mount Tabor: ‘And his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as snow. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elijah talking with him.’ Then, ‘a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.”’⁵

Both would stay up all night in ineffable meditation; both sweated blood. Both lived exclusively for God, paying no attention to the preservation of their lives. Ramakrishna asked who cries for God because they have not realized him? Christ tells his disciples to ‘let the dead bury the dead’. Ramakrishna does not hesitate to clean unspeakably filthy places; Christ does not disdain to wash his disciples’ feet. Ramakrishna said that he had come before as Rama and Krishna, but that now he was as a king visiting his kingdom incognito; of Christ, Saint John wrote that he came into the world and the world knew him

not. Both could impart enlightenment with a touch. Ramakrishna asked the Divine Mother to remove his outer beauty; of Christ it was said, ‘Fairer in beauty are you than the sons of men.’⁶ Only space prevents a multitude of other such similarities from being mentioned here.

Similarities in Their Teachings

There is a fascinating dialogue that takes place between M and Ramakrishna, much to the Master’s amusement. It is worth mentioning here.

M: ‘You don’t ask your devotees to fast or practise other austerities. You don’t prescribe hard and fast rules about food. Christ’s disciples did not observe the Sabbath; so the Pharisees took them to task. Thereupon Jesus said: “They have done well to eat. As long as they are with the bridegroom, they must make merry.”’

Master: ‘What does that mean?’

M: ‘Christ meant that as long as the disciples live with the Incarnation of God, they should only make merry. Why should they be sorrowful? But when He returns to His own abode in heaven, then will come the days of their sorrow and suffering.’

Master (*smiling*): ‘Do you find anything else in me that is similar to Christ?’

M: ‘Yes, sir. You say: “The youngsters are not yet touched by ‘woman and gold’; they will be able to assimilate instruction. It is like keeping milk in a new pot: the milk may turn sour if it is kept in a pot in which curd has been made.” Christ also spoke like that.’

Master: ‘What did He say?’

M: ‘If new wine is kept in an old bottle, the bottle may crack. If an old cloth is patched with new cloth, the old cloth tears away.’

‘Further, you tell us that you and the Mother are one. Likewise, Christ said, “I and My Father are one.”’

Master (*smiling*): ‘Anything else?’

M: 'You say to us, "God will surely listen to you if you call on Him earnestly." So also Christ said, "Knock and it shall be opened unto you."⁷


In the famous dialogue between Uddalaka and his son Shvetaketu, recorded in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, we find the following words: '*Tat tvam asi*; thou art That.'⁸ These words are taken to mean that in its original, pure, primordial state, the Self is identifiable with the ultimate Reality, which is the ground and origin of all phenomena. Knowledge of this leads to the liberation or salvation that accompanies mystical union. Similarly, a psalm in the Bible also tells us that we are essentially gods: 'You are gods, all of you sons of the Most High.'⁹ Many Christians argue that there is an unbridgeable ontological gap between being one with God and merely being a god. Yet, Jesus tells his disciples: 'Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.'¹⁰ If only God can be as perfect as God—and this is what Jesus asks of his disciples—then the human soul must be godly too. He did not say that the kingdom of heaven was within *him* only, but that 'the kingdom of heaven is within *you*.'¹¹ You, me, and all of us, *tat tvam asi*. Such things cannot be understood merely by the intellect, but by the enlightened loving heart. Not by the authority of religion, or scriptures, or tradition, or dogmas and creeds, but by the experience of God's love. 'The one thing you need is to realize God,' said Sri Ramakrishna, and he sang: 'O Mother, make me mad with Thy Love! / What need have I of knowledge and reason?'¹²

Hindu and Christian Concepts of Avatara

Judaism rejects any concept of an incarnation of God in any form, and particularly the Christian idea of Jesus as a divine incarnation of God. In Islam God is one and neither begets nor is begotten; therefore, it too specifically rejects the Christian idea of Jesus as a divine incarnation.

Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God the Father, but that he is the *only* divine incarnation ever to take place historically. Hinduism, on the other hand, teaches that God has incarnated or has come down to us in the form of avatars a number of times. The Christian and the Hindu concept of incarnation seem fundamentally irreconcilable. For orthodox believing Christians, Christ did not so much save humankind by his words as by his blood. He did not so much redeem humankind from ignorance as from sin. That is why Christians usually refuse, adamantly, that there can be any other divine incarnation than Christ. Christians believe that 'creation had a beginning, and what is more important, in the beginning it was good.'¹³ Man was created in the image and likeness of God, but he lost this likeness—not this image—by a sudden fall in time. It takes another event in time to redeem man, and this was Christ's atonement 'on Golgotha: when out of compassion for mankind God sacrificed his only begotten son. There is therefore no need for further incarnations' (9). For Hindus, there was no actual beginning, and a fog of ignorance always pervaded relative existence.

Are these two positions necessarily irreconcilable? Hindus understand that avatars come down to earth to teach the world when spirituality grows dim, while most Christians insist that the only divine incarnation is Christ. Yet, surely some common ground must exist between these two positions. Though Saint Augustine of Hippo believed that the Christian Church was the one true religion, he did open up an avenue of reflection worth examining. He says: 'That which is known as the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and never did not exist; from the beginning of the human race until the time when Christ came in the flesh, at which time the true religion, which already existed began to be called

Christianity.¹⁴ To paraphrase: true religion existed from all times and was called Christianity when Christ was born in Bethlehem. Many histories of the Church echo this view. Logically enough Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism should be looked upon by Christians as forms of that early true religion. The first Christian historian, Eusebius (c. 4th cent. CE) wrote that: 'the names of Jesus and Christ were both known and honored by the ancients.'¹⁵ Christians can take great comfort to learn that the Ramakrishna movement was inaugurated on Christmas Eve, 1897. Between Ramakrishna and Christ one finds such kinship of spirit, of life, and of teaching that one cannot help but merge them in one's heart of devotion, the same way they merged that blessed day in the Panchavati. When we 'taste and see how sweet the Lord is,'¹⁶ when we experience God, we will know beyond argumentation where to find him. Christians, who are truly 'the fragrance of Christ for God,'¹⁷ will have no difficulty recognizing in Ramakrishna that same divine aroma that puts us in the mood of holy union. 

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Spirit of Warmest Love

In his childlike humility Ramakrishna is akin to Francis of Assisi. To kill the last stirrings of caste pride in himself he would undertake the most menial tasks. This mystic, who found such delight in the experience of ecstasy, was inspired also by a spirit of warmest love for his fellows. 'Oh Mother,' he entreats the goddess Kali, whom he deeply revered to the end of his life, 'let me remain in contact with mankind; let me not become a hard ascetic.' For him there were no questions of dogma. He decided the question whether personality is to be ascribed to God or not by saying that men imagine Him according to their natural gifts as a personality or as non-personal. In thorough Hindu fashion Ramakrishna

judged that God Himself is somehow or other present in an image and draws to Himself the worship given to it. He did not trouble about the universal religion comprising all religions within itself which Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and Dayananda Sarasvati were concerned [with]. What men believe he held to be of secondary importance. Piety is all that matters. Every religion, whatever its doctrine, becomes the true religion when man dedicates himself in love to God and serves his neighbour in love.

—Albert Schweitzer (1952 Nobel Peace laureate and Christian missionary in Africa),
Indian Thought and Its Development, 217

Sri Ramakrishna and the Experiential Basis of Vedantic Religious Pluralism

Dr Jeffery D Long

ONE COULD ARGUE that the single most distinctive teaching of modern Vedanta is the ideal of the harmony of religions propounded by Sri Ramakrishna. The basis of this ideal, for Sri Ramakrishna, is not an abstract reflection on the nature of Truth and religious diversity but a concrete, direct experience of the ultimate Reality facilitated by a wide variety of spiritual paths—each of these paths having its own world view and its own corresponding practices, all of which the Master cultivated and pursued in the course of his lifetime.

Sri Ramakrishna's Experiences

For adherents of modern Vedanta, the rootedness of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching in experience grants it a level of authority not enjoyed by those whose teaching is rooted in reason alone or in the authority of another's testimony. In principle that experience is available to any who might attempt to replicate the Master's experiments with Truth.¹ This in-principle availability of experiences like Sri Ramakrishna's to all who might engage in the requisite practices gives these experiences not the exclusivity of a claim that must be taken on faith—such as Jesus's claim to a unique relationship with his Father in heaven—but rather a science-like universality.

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In this respect the Vedanta of Sri Ramakrishna is more like shramanic traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism, which also claim as their basis the experience of a human being, than the classical Vedanta of the great acharyas, which claims as its basis the authority of the infallible, eternal, non-man-made, *apaurusheya*, words of the Vedas. Like the experiences of Mahavira and Buddha, the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna are subjectively testable, at least in principle. One simply needs to tread the same path these masters have trodden—though this is something far more easily said than done!

Note that this testability is subjective in nature. It is *experiential*, not empirical. This is an important distinction and is the reason I have described Sri Ramakrishna's experiences as science-like rather than scientific. Empirical evidence can be observed and assessed by a third party. But one's experience can be known in all its qualitative richness by oneself alone. A third party can certainly observe the effects of one's experience as well as listen to or read an account of it. But the experience itself is unavailable in any direct way. For even if one could grant the possibility of extrasensory perception or a direct *prehension* of the experience of another—as this is understood in process thought.² Even then the resulting perception is nevertheless a distinct experience from the original experience that is its object.

Because of the subjective character of an experience and its resulting inability to be directly analyzed by a third party—as distinct from its

empirically available effects—mystical experiences such as those of Sri Ramakrishna are controversial as sources of knowledge. As was stated above, in principle the devotee can replicate these experiences for himself or herself by cultivating the same sadhanas, spiritual disciplines, as the Master. For most devotees this kind of subjective verification is sufficient, for it is the *experience* that the devotee is interested in. However, from the perspective of the philosopher or the researcher who is interested only in the knowledge that these mystical experiences are alleged to produce, ‘Try it for yourself!’ is not a very satisfying answer.

The controversy arises due to the subjective nature of mystical experiences. A telescope is able to increase the visual ability of anyone with normal sight who looks through it. If one doubts the existence of the rings of Saturn, one only needs to gaze at Saturn through a telescope to see the rings for oneself. This will work for anyone with normal eyesight who chooses to look through the telescope. It requires no prior act of faith or preparation. But spiritual exercises, which refine the mind in order to enable it to perceive higher realities such as those experienced by Sri Ramakrishna, only serve to refine one’s own mind alone. Another person cannot gaze ‘through’ one’s own mind—as if it were a telescope—in order to perceive these higher realities for oneself. This gives rise to a doubt among some scholars of mystical experience and to a resulting division of these scholars into two distinct schools of thought.

Perennialism and Constructivism

The two predominant schools of thought in the study of mystical experience are called ‘perennialism’ and ‘constructivism’. The perennialist school, taking its name from the famous book of Aldous Huxley *The Perennial Philosophy*, claims

that experiences of the kind attributed to Sri Ramakrishna—mystical experiences of direct realization of the Divine—are of an objective reality that is distinct from one’s subjective awareness. To put it simply, one experiences God because God is *really there*, just as one experiences the objects of sensory perception. The experiences of the great mystics, such as the ones recorded by Huxley, are therefore reliable sources of information about the nature of the Divine. On this basis, Sri Ramakrishna’s experiences of God-realization through the practice of many spiritual paths constitute strong evidence for his doctrine of the harmony of religions: ‘*yata mat, tata path*; as many religions, so many paths.’ Many religions can act as paths to the direct realization of God.

The constructivist school, on the other hand, claims that the content of mystical experiences is determined by the culturally-bound practices that produce them. Having a more sceptical perspective, a constructivist asks: ‘If mystical experiences all have as their basis an objective divine Reality, then why do their experiences vary to the great degree that they do?’ In other words, why do the Christian, the Hindu, and the Buddhist not experience exactly the same thing? Why does the Christian mystic have a vision of Jesus and Mother Mary, while the Hindu has a vision of Lord Krishna, and the Buddhist has a vision of many Buddhas and Bodhisattvas? And why does the Hindu never see Jesus and Mary, or the Christian Lord Krishna, and so on?

Clearly, the reality perceived by the religious mystic is not like that perceived in ordinary sensory perception. If a Christian, a Hindu, and a Buddhist visit the zoo and see a giraffe, each of them sees a giraffe. It is not that the Christian sees a giraffe, the Hindu a cow, and the Buddhist an elephant. The variation in the mystical perceptions of those who practise different spiritual paths gives rise to the justifiable suspicion, on the

part of the constructivist, that these diverse 'perceptions' are not perceptions at all—involving an objective reality distinct from the perceiver, like the giraffe at the zoo—but are nothing more than subjective by-products of practices that induce altered states of consciousness. From a staunch constructivist point of view, a Christian of course sees Jesus and Mary, a Hindu Krishna, a Buddhist Buddha, and so on. They all see what they expect to see, and their respective experiences are precisely those that the spiritual practices cultivated in their respective communities are designed to produce.³

The perennialist is not unaware of this problem. The philosopher of religion John Hick, for example, expresses a fairly typical perennialist understanding. He develops his hypothesis that the Reality experienced by the mystics of the great religious traditions is a shared one, though one that is nevertheless experienced differently by the practitioners of different traditions because of the expectations that they project upon it. According to his view, the 'Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* ... are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.'⁴ The one Reality is experienced by the Christian as Jesus, by the Buddhist as Buddha, by the Hindu as Krishna, and so on. All of these perceptions differ, just as a constructivist would say, with the practices and presuppositions that the mystics bring to their experiences. But all of these experiences share a common substrate: the Real.

Though it is a logically elegant response to the scepticism of the constructivist, a hypothesis such as this is ultimately insufficient to dispel

scepticism. The sceptic can respond that this affirmation of a common substrate underlying the mystical experiences of many religions is a mere assertion. Where is the proof?

The proof that there really is an objective ground underlying the diverse mystical experiences attested in the world's religions would have to consist of some shared quality that such experiences would have—regardless of the local, culturally-bound practices that might give rise to them.

Such qualities do exist in the form of the effects to which these experiences are widely said to give rise among those who have them. Hick describes the transformative effects of mystical experiences in terms of a radical shift in the life of the person who has them—from a state of 'self-centredness' to one of 'Reality-centredness' (36–55). Spiritual practitioners who claim to have had powerful, direct encounters with a higher Reality have been widely reported to experience a heightened sense of joy and overall well-being and also to demonstrate increased compassion and insight. These changes are reported across religious boundaries. They do not depend upon whether the practitioner is a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, or a Jew. They happen to people of many religions.

Constructivists might agree that such universally attested cases of personal transformation certainly strengthen the case that mystics from a variety of traditions are tapping into a shared source of human potential. However, they might object that it does not necessarily follow that this shared source is an objective reality, independent of the culturally-bound practices that give rise to these experiences. It could be argued, for example, that even the personal transformations to which mystical experiences give rise are part of the set of expectations built into a spiritual practice. One expects to be transformed in a posi-

tive way by one's practice—just as one expects to have a vision of one's deity—so it happens.

What perennialists really need to demonstrate is that an objective reality does, in fact, underlie the diverse experiences of the world's mystics, though it is something unexpected. It is an experience that cannot be seen to derive directly from the assumptions underlying the practice that evokes it.

Research of Mystical Experiences

In her recent scholarly work on practitioners of Hindu-based spiritual paths in the United States, Lola Williamson suggests that those who practise regular meditation can attest to just such surprising experiences. Among the numerous practitioners from a range of different meditation traditions that Williamson interviewed, many reported seeing a light while meditating. Williamson interviewed practitioners in Transcendental

Meditation, Siddha Yoga, and Self-Realization Fellowship—practices originated by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, and Paramahansa Yogananda respectively. Practitioners of Siddha Yoga and in the Self-Realization Fellowship are both taught that they should expect to see a light while in meditation. The fact that many do so fits well with the more sceptical, constructivist idea that mystical experiences are derived from expectations rather than from an objective reality.

On the other hand, nowhere in the introductory lectures do TM [Transcendental Meditation] instructors mention that the meditator will experience light. Yet both Diane and Mark [TM practitioners who were interviewed by Williamson] had very distinct experiences of inner illumination, which seemed to take them by surprise. The fact that they experienced something for which they were unprepared supports ... the 'perennialist' view. According

Sri Ramakrishna commented on this painting, which shows him pointing out to Keshabchandra Sen the harmony of religions: 'It contains everything; this is the ideal of the modern times'



to this theory, mystical experiences occur at a level beyond language and therefore similarities can be found across cultures.⁵

Across the world religious accounts exist of people who had spontaneous mystical experiences that they did not seek out through a specific, culturally-bound practice. These cannot be said to be based on a set of prior expectations—such as the famous vision of St Paul, who had been engaged in a vicious persecution of Christians until receiving an unexpected, and presumably unwanted, vision of Christ while on the road to Damascus. Therefore, one has at least the beginning of a case that there is, indeed, an objective ground underlying the diverse experiences of mystics from a variety of religious traditions.

The final recourse of the sceptic, at this point, is to grant that an objective ground of mystical experience does exist, but to question whether this ground needs to be what the mystic affirms it to be. Perhaps, the sceptic can argue that the objective ground of mystical experiences rests in human biology. Williamson's meditators see light probably because the practice of meditation has an effect on the brain that produces an experience of this kind—not because there really is a light 'there'. Maybe St Paul suffered from a neurological episode brought on by, or at least interpreted in terms of, unconscious guilt about his persecution of the Christians.

The best perennialist response to this claim, it seems to me, would be the response of William James, whose monumental work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is still required reading in the field of phenomenology of religion. James, a philosopher and psychologist who, incidentally, met and thought very highly of Swami Vivekananda, was an adherent and early advocate for an American style of philosophy called prag-

matism—an approach to philosophy not unlike that of Sri Ramakrishna and Mahatma Gandhi. According to pragmatism, ideas should be assessed not on the basis of an abstract conception of Truth—apart from basic internal logical consistency—but they should be assessed on the basis of their relevance to lived human experience. The pragmatist asks of any philosophical claim not simply 'Is this true?' but 'What *difference* does it make if this is true?'

On the basis of pragmatism James develops a concept which he refers to as 'the right to believe'. According to James, if one is presented with more than one possible interpretation of a set of data, and if all these possible interpretations are both internally coherent and consistent with the facts at hand, then one is free to choose whichever view one wishes on the basis of other considerations.

The sceptic, therefore, is quite justified in affirming that the objective ground of mystical experience is biological, or otherwise material, in character. But interpretations of mystical experience in religious terms are also justifiable, so long as the interpretations in question are both internally coherent and consistent with the available facts. There is no reason a mystical experience cannot have a biological basis that is explainable in the terms of empirical science, while also being an experience of a higher Reality manifesting itself to one's experience through the medium of the human organism.

The sceptic can of course object that this 'higher Reality' is a hypothesis that is not necessary to the scientific explanation of the mystical experience. And the sceptic is quite right to do so. But the pragmatist response to this objection is that one's motivation in life is not limited to scientific considerations. The belief in a higher, divine Reality that is accessible through mystical experience can be profoundly comforting. It can

operate within the context of a larger world view that gives a foundation for one's moral choices and one's sense that life has a meaning and a purpose. Such a belief can be conducive to, and may even be necessary for, good mental health. If the belief is not irrational and if it does not entail a direct or insuperable conflict with either logic or available facts, then it is a justifiable belief.

This is the route followed by philosopher William Alston. Alston argues—on the basis of principles derived, ultimately, from James—that Christian belief on the basis of Christian religious experiences, based on Christian belief-forming or 'doxastic' practices, is justified. Alston is aware that one of the main objections to his argument is that it applies equally well to religious beliefs based in other traditions. By the same argument that he applies to Christianity, a Hindu is also justified in holding Hindu beliefs on the basis of Hindu religious experiences, a Buddhist is justified in holding Buddhist beliefs on the basis of Buddhist religious experiences, and the same is applicable with regard to Muslims, Jews, and others.

Alston's response to this objection, interestingly, is to grant its validity and to invoke John Hick. He argues that something like Hick's pluralistic hypothesis mentioned above could well be true: a common basis underlies the religious experiences and beliefs of many traditions.⁶

Sri Ramakrishna's Harmony of Religions

This, of course, brings us to Sri Ramakrishna and his teaching of the harmony of religions. On the basis of the foregoing argument I hope I have established the following propositions:

(i) Sceptical, constructivist objections notwithstanding, one is justified in the view that a shared objective ground underlies the mystical experiences of spiritual aspirants in a variety of religious traditions.

(ii) The beliefs of the world's mystics about their experiences are also justified, so long as these do not conflict with basic criteria of logic and conform to the available data. Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on, may all be experiencing a transcendent Reality as they believe themselves to be doing.

(iii) Finally, at least one possible logical response to the fact that many belief systems are justifiable on the basis of mystical experience is to accept that there are many paths to the experience of the transcendent reality: *yata mat, tata path*.

These are conclusions Sri Ramakrishna arrived at through experience. Sri Ramakrishna did not, as I have done here, merely assess the claims of those who had mystical experiences. He sought these experiences out himself, engaging in the doxastic practices of a variety of traditions—Hindu, Christian, and Islamic—until achieving the goal of direct experience toward which those practices pointed. He did not conclude but *discovered*, on the basis of direct experience, that many paths lead to transcendence.

As a subjective experience this discovery was different from looking at the rings of Saturn or at the giraffe at the zoo. It is not a truth readily available to all; it requires cultivation of the practices necessary to its realization. It is, therefore, not empirical by the strictest understanding of this term. Its public availability is limited by the need for a prior practice that readies the mind for its occurrence.

But it is *experiential*. If one can compare the cultivation of doxastic practices, by way of analogy, to peering through a telescope—to transforming one's mind, as it were, through these practices, into a telescope for viewing a transcendent Reality—then it *is* like looking at the rings of Saturn or at the giraffe at the zoo. For it is an experience available, in principle, to anyone willing to cultivate these practices.

Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of the harmony of religions is a radical teaching with profound implications that have yet to be fully realized by the world at large. If it were to be absorbed by the wider public—the practitioners of religious traditions across the globe—it might usher in not only an era of peace and inter-religious co-operation. Indeed, even the attainment of that elusive and much-sought goal would be just the beginning. It might mark the beginning of an era of mass inter-religious experimentation, as practitioners of many spiritual paths would learn from and integrate the insights of one another into their various practices, to further enhance and deepen their experience of ultimate Reality. This era has perhaps already begun with the inter-religious experiments of persons like Gandhi, the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, and the American seekers chronicled by Williamson. Perhaps, this is just a taste of what is to come in the future, for which the path of Sri Ramakrishna gives us reason to hope.

Sri Ramakrishna's teaching of the harmony of religions also raises a number of questions. If many paths can lead to the highest realization, does this mean that they are all, in some sense, true? If so, how can this be the case, given the many contradictions in the teachings of the world's religions? Is the ground of mystical experience necessarily one and the same in all cases? Might experiences of a personal deity, of an impersonal absolute, and of cosmic harmony be experiences grounded in distinct elements of a larger Reality? Might their differences not be merely apparent but grounded in substantive metaphysical distinctions?

I, and others, have taken up these questions in depth elsewhere.⁷ Unfortunately, space does not permit me to expound upon these issues here. Suffice it to say that the experiences of Sri Ramakrishna and the insights to which they

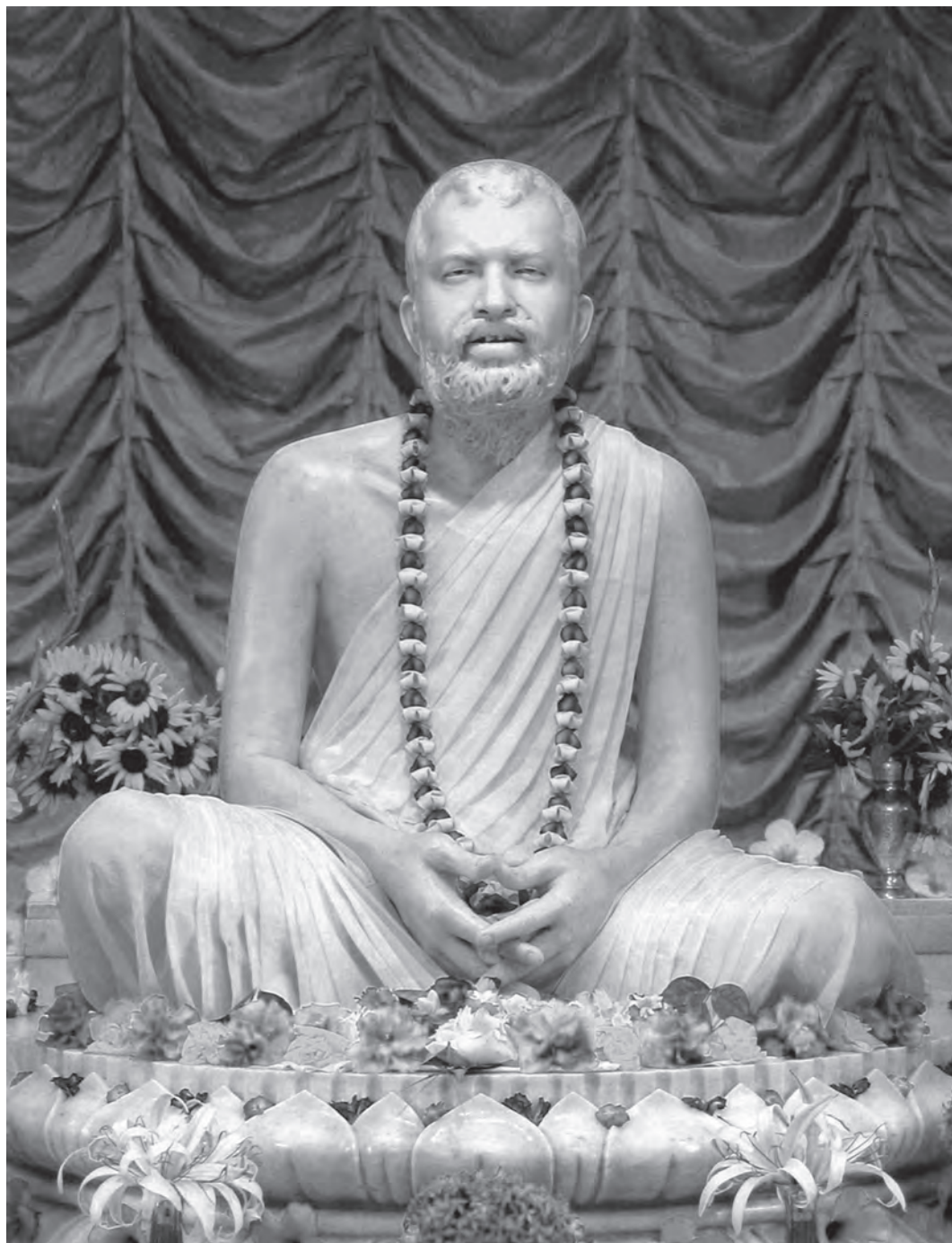
have given rise ought to provide philosophers with abundant material for contemplation for ages to come!



Notes and References

1. I am deliberately citing here the famous title of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography; for Ramakrishna's approach to truth was, like Gandhi's, experimental, testing truth claims on the basis of a direct embodiment of those claims in practice, rather than on the basis of the application of abstract reasoning alone.
2. The process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead allows for the possibility of extrasensory perceptions in the form of prehensions, 'the vehicles by which one actual entity becomes objectified in another', which are the basis of all forms of perception—*A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*, ed. Donald W. Sherburne (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966), 235. Contemporary process philosopher David Ray Griffin elaborates upon the concept of prehensions in his *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997).
3. The strongest articulation of the constructivist view is probably Wayne Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).
4. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Yale University, 1989), 242.
5. Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion* (New York: New York University, 2010), 162.
6. William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cornell University, 1993), 264–5.
7. My first book, *A Vision for Hinduism: Beyond Hindu Nationalism* (London: I B Tauris, 2007) is almost wholly devoted to these issues, as is the volume *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005), in which authors from a variety of religious traditions—myself included—pursue these issues from the point of view of the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

Kaleidoscopic Perspectives



Finding the Explanation: Interpreting Sri Ramakrishna

Pravrajika Vrajaprana

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ONCE REMARKED that Sri Ramakrishna ‘was contented simply to live that great life and to leave it to others to find the explanation.’¹ ‘Finding the explanation’ of Sri Ramakrishna’s life has preoccupied any number of people since they first encountered him, and the number shows no sign of diminishing. The study of his life has taken on a life of its own as spiritual seekers, politicians, psychiatrists, religious scholars, cultural anthropologists, and historians have tried to make sense of a life that has both inspired and confounded people for long over a century.

In attempting to find an explanation we move into the territory of interpretation and hermeneutics. To overly simplify a complex term, ‘hermeneutics’ is the art of interpretation and is largely concerned with the problems of understanding and interpreting the meanings of texts. ‘Texts’ is at the heart of our discussion, since what we know about Sri Ramakrishna is, to a great extent, based upon what we read in texts. Every text, however—even a translation—is also someone’s interpretation.

Every human mind is uniquely shaped by various internal and external factors: psychological, social, environmental, cultural, historical, religious, political, economic—and this is only the first layer of the deep strata that constitute

any human being. When we perceive and interpret something, we peer through this strata, and our perception is inevitably distorted by this mental environment and refracted through it. For that reason, and despite high-minded claims to the contrary, there is no such thing as an ‘objective’ book or an ‘objective’ view, for every book necessarily contains subjective elements. Subjectivity plays a major role in determining what makes an author highlight one thing at the expense of another, or position events in an order or a pattern best suited to conform to the author’s agenda or thesis.

First Interpreters

In examining the interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna’s life, we find such disparity among them that it is often difficult to believe they are discussing the same person. This should not be surprising, though, for as Gwilym Beckerlegge noted: ‘Both Ramakrishna and then Vivekananda have been constantly reinvented and represented in the light of the interests and concerns of those who have written about them.’²

Sri Ramakrishna’s first interpreters were those who provided the source texts upon which nearly all other interpretations have been based. Most interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna are heavily dependent upon two source texts—Mahendranath Gupta’s (M’s) *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*) and Swami Saradananda’s *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga* (*Sri Ramakrishna*

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the Great Master). Also included among source texts—the tradition’s foundational texts—are Ramchandra Datta’s *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsadeber Jibanabrittanta*, which has as yet no English translation, and reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna from Sri Sarada Devi and the direct disciples. These source texts are first generation, having come from people who knew Sri Ramakrishna, heard his words directly, and recorded them in their lifetime.

How is M’s record of Sri Ramakrishna’s conversations also an interpretation? One example: In reading the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* we see M’s authorial strategy of asking himself such rhetorical questions as: ‘Was Sri Ramakrishna hinting that he was an Incarnation of God?’ or ‘Is the Divine Mother of the Universe manifesting Herself through his person?’ or ‘Is this another crucifixion—the sacrifice of the body for the sake of the devotees?’³ These rhetorical questions situate the author’s views on Sri Ramakrishna within the context of his conversations and yet are M’s interpretation. The author’s unspoken response to his questions was yes, yes, and again, yes.

While M compiled a record of Sri Ramakrishna’s conversations, Swami Saradananda wrote Sri Ramakrishna’s biography. Like M, Swami Saradananda believed Sri Ramakrishna to be an avatara, and the book’s expansive scope is set out with a note on India’s long history of spirituality and the place of the avatara within that history. Swami Saradananda’s unique interpretive device was to locate in *bhavamukha*, ‘the threshold of consciousness’, a unifying principle that integrated all the known events of Sri Ramakrishna’s life as well as his teachings. Swami Saradananda’s deep faith in Sri Ramakrishna as God incarnate was responsible not only for his literary presentation of Sri Ramakrishna as the avatara of the age but also for his prodigious re-

search that made the *Lilaprasanga* the authoritative text that it is. Swami Saradananda sees Sri Ramakrishna as an avatara whose earthly life was of greatest importance, hence we see in the text historical research against the backdrop of the avatara’s lila.

The first generation of interpreters worked with a number of presuppositions that would, by and large, not be replicated once ‘finding the explanation’ left India’s shores. While all the source texts took as a given that Sri Ramakrishna was an avatara—one who was divinely inspired and whose actions were motivated by selfless compassion—once Sri Ramakrishna was brought to the world’s attention, his interpreters would work with social, religious, and political assumptions that would preclude such leaps of faith.

Second Generation of Interpreters

Friedrich Max Müller, the renowned German Orientalist who taught religion and philology at Oxford University, is a case in point. Müller had an abiding interest in ‘purifying’ Hinduism, and for that reason he greatly admired the Brahmo Samaj’s Protestantized formulation of it. What he truly longed for, however, was the Christianization of Hinduism, hoping that Brahmo Samaj members would eventually designate themselves as Christians, declaring themselves to be either ‘Christian Brahmos’ or ‘Christian Aryas’.⁴ While Müller appreciated the philosophical flights found in the *Brahma Sutra* and the Upanishads, he was appalled by Hinduism’s ground-level applications ‘with its idol-worship, its temple-service, its caste, its mendicants’ (428).

Müller discovered Sri Ramakrishna via an article written by the Brahmo preacher Pratap Mazumdar, who presented those teachings of Sri Ramakrishna that best reflected Brahmo philosophy. Müller’s interest was piqued to the

extent that he wrote an article on Sri Ramakrishna entitled 'A Real Mahatman', which appeared in the August 1896 issue of *Nineteenth Century*. Swami Vivekananda, who was then in London, sent Müller a pamphlet on Sri Ramakrishna, most likely written by M. In reply, Müller wrote that he would be 'very glad to write a larger and fuller account ... if sufficient materials were forthcoming'.⁵ Swamiji immediately asked Swami Saradananda to provide biographical material on Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Ramakrishnananda to provide Sri Ramakrishna's sayings.

Having already spent a considerable amount of time in the West, Swamiji knew what kind of material Müller—and Müller's audience—would and would not accept. He wrote Swami Ramakrishnananda, specifying: 'We must take care to present only the universal aspect of his teachings.'⁶ Nevertheless, despite Swamiji's cautions, Müller was displeased with the calibre of the material he received. As he later wrote: 'I applied ... to one of his [Sri Ramakrishna's] most eminent pupils, Vivekananda, asking him to write down for me what he could tell of his own knowledge of his venerable teacher. ... It will be easily seen, however, that even this account is

not quite free from traditional elements.'⁷ Those 'traditional elements' were defined by Müller as the 'dialogic process', which he characterized as the 'irrepressible miraculising tendencies of devoted disciples' (30) that mythologized the historical facts of a teacher's life.

What Müller, in fact, meant was that the material provided to him did not fit into the intellectual model created by the Europe's eighteenth-century Enlightenment tradition, a tradition suffused with Protestant Christianity. Truth was identified with scientifically or historically verifiable events. To give credence to anything outside linear time was to endorse mythology over history, fiction over fact. As Müller wrote in his autobiography: 'Vivekananda and the other followers of Rāmakrishna ought ... to teach their followers how to distinguish between the perfervid utterances of their teacher, Rāmakrishna, an enthusiastic Bhakta (devotee), and the clear and dry style of the Sūtras of Bādarāyana. The Vedānta spirit is there, but the form often becomes too vague and exaggerated to give us an idea of what the true Gnānin (knower) ought to be.'⁸

Though Müller introduced Indology to the English-speaking world, he also believed that on the ladder of religious evolution Hinduism was near the bottom rung—Christianity being neatly perched on top. While genuinely impressed with Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual insights, Müller nevertheless interpreted Sri Ramakrishna according to European standards, using Western methodology and Western hermeneutical tools. Müller could not step outside his culture or religion, nor would he have seen the value of doing so. His interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna was bleached by the fact that he could only value those portions of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings that mirrored what he valued in the Western tradition,

In the world conditions of today, which exhibit tenseness and narrowness of outlook and a run after materialism, it becomes our duty to study and understand Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna, his life and philosophy. This is all the more necessary and essential not only in view of our own duty, but in view of the expectations of the world and the role that India is destined to play for the peace of the world and for the progress of humanity.

—G V Mavalanker,
Vedanta for East and West, 4/5, 184

which in his case was Kantian German Protestant idealism.

Müller was not unique in his limited gauge for assessing Sri Ramakrishna. A limited gauge has been the rule rather than the exception, for if there has been one consistent element in Sri Ramakrishna's Western interpreters, it has been their difficulty in assessing him by anything other than a Euro-American model. Since human beings live in societies, the process of 'finding the explanation' of Sri Ramakrishna over the past century has been mediated by a host of diverse forces, among them colonialism, orientalism, European and Indian nationalism, the ascendancy of the Western scientific model, and the embracing of psychoanalysis. Scholarship on Sri Ramakrishna has closely mirrored this complex movement of intertwining forces, with interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna often revealing more of the interpreter than the interpreted. Indeed, the more interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna one reads, the more Ashis Nandy's pithy phrase rings true: 'All writing about India is in some sense autobiographical.'⁹

Romain Rolland, on the other hand, could have cared less about 'what a real Gnānin ought to be', but he cared deeply about the toll wrought by Europe's First World War. Rolland saw Sri Ramakrishna as a solution to the West's self-inflicted carnage, as Rolland believed that India's religious teachers shared one universal goal: 'human unity through God.'¹⁰ Rolland had read Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Face of Silence*, which he greatly appreciated. Mukerji's interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna tended more to fable than fact, employing an orientalist romantic stereotype of the 'exotic East' for Western consumption. Predigested as it was, it found a ready audience there. Rolland extended his reading to the *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, early editions of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and

Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master, besides corresponding with Swami Shivananda. The result was Rolland's *Life of Ramakrishna* and his later *Life of Vivekananda*. As with Müller's imprimatur, Rolland's advocacy would ensure that Sri Ramakrishna's fame in the West would extend further, and to a more diverse audience. For, while Müller was justly famed as one of the world's finest scholars, Rolland had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. However, what is perhaps most intriguing about Rolland is the role he played in introducing Sri Ramakrishna to Sigmund Freud.

Rolland shared a long, warm correspondence with Freud and had sent him his biographies of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, asking for Freud's analysis of the mystic's 'oceanic feeling'. As described by Rolland, Sri Ramakrishna's first great experience of Kali was 'an ocean of the Spirit, boundless, dazzling' (15). While Rolland saw Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experience as a great universal spiritual experience available to all humanity, Freud's reaction was to wait eighteen months before even answering the letter. When Freud finally replied, he wrote: 'Your letter ... containing your remarks about a feeling you describe as "oceanic" has left me no peace.'¹¹ Freud wrestled with its implications in his landmark work *Civilization and Its Discontents*. The 'oceanic experience' deeply distressed Freud and shook his belief in the inevitability of civilization, seeing the experience as a threat to mature humanity. Not only was the 'oceanic experience' one of infantile regression in Freud's eyes, he also believed the desire to have the experience was associated with the death wish. It is at this point that Freud enters the story of scholarship on Sri Ramakrishna, but to this day Freud's presence continues to hover over scholarly interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna and Indology as a whole.

While Rolland did not accept Freud's views on mysticism, neither did he pursue his interest in Sri Ramakrishna. His interest in him extended only so far as he presumed Sri Ramakrishna could effect a change in Europe's existing *modus operandi*. In that he was disappointed, and by the 1930s he gave up on religion altogether, becoming interested in socialism and combating fascism through armed resistance.

Müller, Rolland, and Mukerji 'exoticized' Sri Ramakrishna—a process that exchanges a human being for a blank canvas upon which one applies particular ideals and goals. As we move forward in time, we will find this process continued as we encounter Western interpreters who employ Western intellectual paradigms to critique Sri Ramakrishna or Hindu culture—Müller, for example—as well as interpreters who have used Sri Ramakrishna for an anti-Western critique—like Rolland and Mukerji. What will remain more or less consistent in earlier and later interpretations is the privileging of a Western paradigm, along with a universalism that presupposes the wholesale applicability of Euro-American norms to other cultures and eras.

Along with Western interpreters, there have been, of course, indigenous interpreters of Sri Ramakrishna as well, including scholarly monastics and devotees within the ranks of the Ramakrishna Mission. They too have sought to 'find the explanation' in various ways while using mainly Hindu paradigms. They are not being discussed here simply because there is not adequate space in this brief survey to analyse their varied and thought-provoking perspectives.¹²

To return to Western shores, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1963) was Christopher Isherwood's way of 'finding the explanation', interpreting Sri Ramakrishna as 'a phenomenon'. Isherwood wrote the book while assuming his readers' scepti-

cism. From the first sentence one sees Isherwood accommodating his readers' incredulity: 'This is the story of a phenomenon. ... A phenomenon is always a fact, an object of experience. This is how I shall try to approach Ramakrishna.' Isherwood presents Sri Ramakrishna in as straightforward a manner as possible, characteristically putting his own cards on the table, stating that he believes him to be an avatara. Aware that many in his audience viewed Hindu mysticism as commensurate with seances and Ouija boards, Isherwood emphasized the ordinary in order to remove any whiff of the spooky.

Isherwood's assumption of his readers' scepticism was not misplaced. While there was some critical appreciation for *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, most Western reviews were unfavourable. Isherwood remarked: 'One recurring objection to the book was that I, who had written such worldly novels, was its author.'¹³ He wrote: 'Many of the reviewers—including even some who were themselves unbelievers—felt offended by the suggestion that Ramakrishna could have been an avatar, since this was a denial of the uniqueness of Jesus as Son of God' (288). Legendary literary critic Frank Kermode wrote, for example, that the book 'lacks all irony, all criticism. ... One would have liked an account of him [Ramakrishna] free of all the uncriticised *Aberglaube* [superstition].'¹⁴ One wonders if 'irony' or 'superstition' would have been considered an appropriate tool for interpreting a figure in the Western monotheistic tradition. Interestingly, what particularly provoked Kermode's ire was not merely Hinduism, but Hinduism 'adapted by Western participants in the flight from reason.'¹⁵ Similarly, George Woodcock's review in *Commonweal* chided Isherwood for being taken in by 'superstition'.¹⁶ A number of Isherwood's critics viewed their reaction as one of 'reason', while

Isherwood was seen as having succumbed to the lure of Hindu fantasy. In general, the negative reviews of *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* took for granted Western secular humanist values and their presumed superiority over anything found in the Hindu tradition.

Hermeneutic of Suspicion

From this point forward we will encounter a re-direction in many Western interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna. If earlier Western interpreters critiqued Sri Ramakrishna for not being what 'a true Gnānin ought to be' or, as Rolland apparently believed, insufficiently concerned with human suffering—at least previous interpretations never questioned Swami Saradananda's legitimacy as an accurate source of information, nor did they see mystical experience as an indication of psychological distress. By the 1960s, however, this scenario would change, and 'finding the explanation' in the West would veer from a hermeneutic of empathy to a hermeneutic of suspicion. What provoked this change?

To grossly oversimplify a complex topic, three men who lived at the end of the nineteenth century profoundly redirected the trajectory of Western thought: Nietzsche—the philosophical godfather of postmodernism, deconstruction, cultural relativism, and such other trends—Marx, and Freud. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously called this triumvirate 'the school of suspicion'; in other words, these men taught the world in various ways to question authority structures and to look with suspicion upon motives and experiences. Words and texts should not be taken at face value: they need to be unmasked to locate the latent motives underlying the apparent ones. These ideas became relevant to the academic study of Sri Ramakrishna because of the very nature of interpretation. As the professor of philosophy J

The underlying message in much of his teachings was to practise modesty, liberality and self-restraint. In religious matters, Ramakrishna was equally disturbed by dogmatism and by disbelief; plurality, he took not as a perennially conflicting viewpoint but as indicating the open-ended character of Truth. What truly mattered was an unflinching belief in the chosen religious path, not what it was generally perceived to be.

—Amiya P Sen, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: The Sadhaka of Dakshineswar*, 143

David Stewart explains: 'All hermeneutics involve suspicion; that is, the text presents us with a challenge to believe that the true meaning of the text emerges only through interpretation. Interpretation is occasioned by a gap between the real meaning of the text and its apparent meaning, and in the act of interpretation suspicion plays a pivotal role.'¹⁷

Thus, the winds of Western cultural change began to slowly but irrevocably alter the direction of hermeneutics in the humanities, including religious studies. Interpreters of religious texts could no longer assume that a text's true meaning was found by simply reading what the text had to say. What it *did not* say was equally important. Interpretation came to be seen as a way of uncovering a text's—or author's or protagonist's—unconscious motivations, drives, and political locations. Unstated in this proposition was the fact that transcendence was left out of the equation. Transcendence was abandoned because it had been either pathologized by Freud, politicized by Marx, or declared dead by Nietzsche. To again grossly oversimplify: postmodern contemporary Western thought presumed the human being to be the body-mind complex, a wondrous machine capable of

greatness, but inherently limited to the sum of its, sadly finite, parts.

Given this philosophical backdrop, a problem then arises: If our hermeneutical paradigms provide no location for mystical experience, how, then, do we interpret it when we encounter it? Framing the question another way, we can ask: How does one interpret Sri Ramakrishna if we presume that 'mystical experience' is outside the realm of normative human behaviour, and hence a potential indicator of psychopathology? The answer to this is given by several Western interpreters who sought to 'find the explanation'.

Walter Neevel's two studies on Sri Ramakrishna begins our arc in the hermeneutic of suspicion. Through a close reading of the English *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Neevel attempts to uncover 'Ramakrishna's own position', which he obviously believes has yet to be revealed. Neevel contests the reliability of Swami Saradananda, who resolved the question of Sri Ramakrishna's birth date via horoscopic reconstruction. For Neevel, this raises 'the question of how the many other uncertainties' concerning Sri Ramakrishna's life were 'resolved' by Swami Saradananda. Neevel suggests that Saradananda restructured the ordering of Sri Ramakrishna's sadhana in his *Lilaprasanga* in order to create the impression that his final realization was Advaita rather than tantra.¹⁸ Amusingly, Neevel finds Müller an authoritative biographical source on Sri Ramakrishna, yet Saradananda was actually the source of Müller's biographical information.

Neevel advances some basic theses on Sri Ramakrishna that other scholars will follow. Apart from his belief that Swami Saradananda's interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna is flawed, Neevel moves away from previous interpretations by asserting that tantra, rather

than Advaita Vedanta, was the central religious focus of Sri Ramakrishna's life. According to Neevel, Sri Ramakrishna's followers have 'over-emphasized the significance' of attaining *nirvikalpa samadhi*.¹⁹ Neevel also asserts that Swami Vivekananda emphasized jnana at the expense of Sri Ramakrishna's true emphasis upon bhakti. By and large, the Western academy will agree on this issue, and to date this view has not changed. Finally, Neevel asserts that while M's recordings of Sri Ramakrishna's conversations were accurate, the writings of Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples could not be considered equally reliable. Neevel writes: 'Without a doubt ... we come the closest to Rāmakrishna in Mahendranāth's recordings, where the overlay of traditions is least significant,'²⁰ a striking echo of Müller's 'dialogic process'.

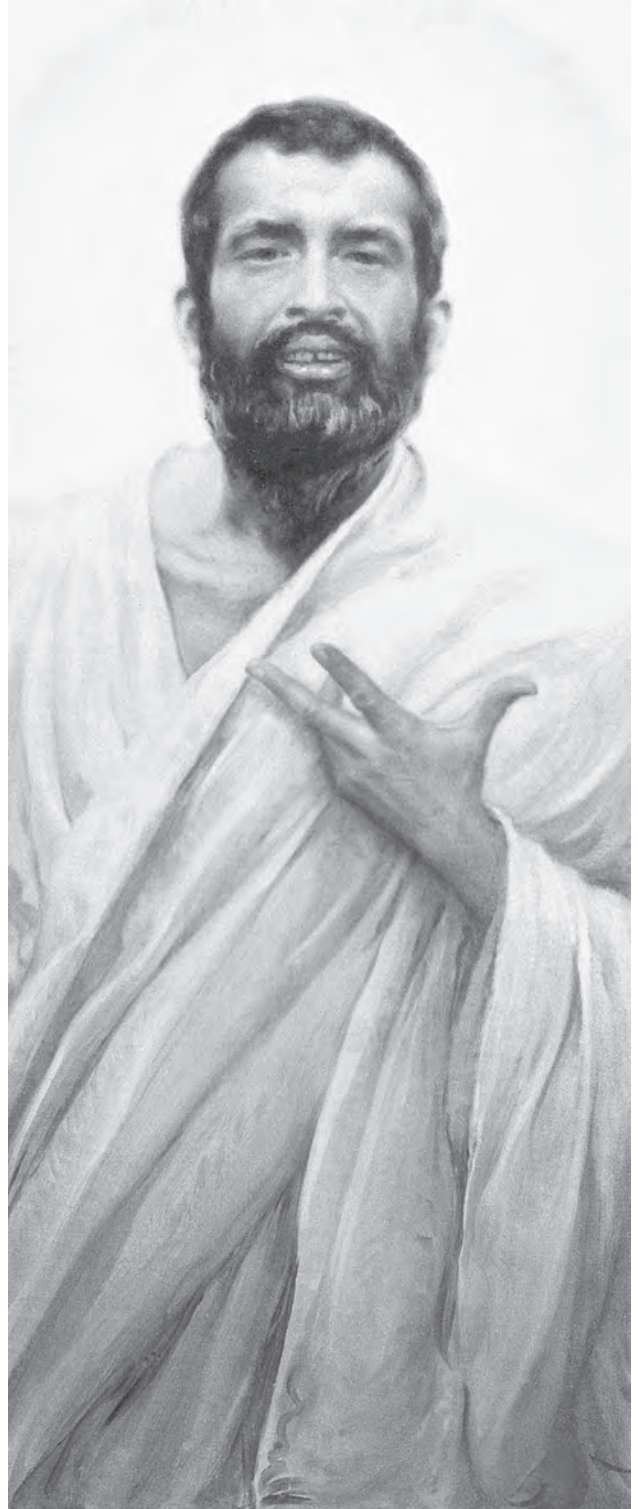
Psychoanalytical Interpretations

Significantly, from this point forward we will see an increasing use of psychoanalysis in 'finding the explanation' of Sri Ramakrishna. While Neevel employed it only lightly, psychoanalysis will be increasingly utilized in ham-handed interpretations of Hindu figures. Yet psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool vis-à-vis non-Western figures is problematic since, as psychoanalyst Alan Roland writes, 'psychoanalytic theory and practice is profoundly related to Northern European and North American cultural values and philosophical assumptions involving individualism.'²¹ The issue of psychoanalysis figures prominently in what could be seen as a latter-day incarnation of orientalism, as psychoanalytic theory presumes Western values and social norms to be universal human values and norms.

Jeffrey Masson's use of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool in the *Oceanic Feeling* serves as a cautionary tale for those who interpret religious figures across cultural and religious

boundaries. By presuming the modern Western cultural model to be the universal human model for all societies and times, Masson summarily dismisses anything outside that narrow template. Not only does he dismiss Buddha, Sri Krishna, Sri Ramakrishna, the Upanishads, and Vedanta philosophy, but also Indian culture as a whole. Masson, a Sanskritist and Freudian psychoanalyst, writes that 'psychoanalysis is always skeptical of ... "spiritual" explanations of ... what we cannot understand.'²² However, Masson's understanding is so wilfully blinkered by a world view that only allows for the Western scientific model in which everything outside that framework automatically becomes pathologized. For example, Masson writes that Buddha emphasized *dubkha* because he was 'severely depressed'. Mysticism itself is 'basically defenses against depression' (x). Masson diagnoses 'severe psychopathology' in Sri Ramakrishna but notes: 'Ramakrishna's world-view was not judged psychotic, because it was shared by his culture' (8–9). Masson's psychoanalytic interpretation is absurdly reductionist, universalizing as he does human motivation, values, and behaviour, presuming that whatever psychiatric issues any human being might have, Freudian analyses and therapies would be culturally universal. Nevertheless, Masson continues to be quoted as a scholarly interpreter of Sri Ramakrishna.

Meanwhile, a new development was taking place in Ramakrishna studies: whereas earlier Western interpreters had relied on English translations of the *Kathamrita* for their interpretations, Malcolm McLean changed that standard by translating the *Kathamrita* into English for his PhD dissertation. McLean was the first Western scholar to seriously examine the Bengali *Kathamrita*, but nevertheless appraised Ramakrishna according to Western cultural



PAINTING OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA BY FRANK DVORAK

norms. Because, for example, Sri Ramakrishna said that he had a 'feminine nature'²³ McLean brands him a homosexual—McLean apparently being clueless to the fact that what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' is extremely culture-specific—and 'feminine' does not constitute homosexuality in the first place. McLean displays abundant ignorance of Indian cultural and religious norms, hence his interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna reveals more his own ignorance than insight on Sri Ramakrishna. For example, McLean speaks of Sri Ramakrishna's 'great insecurity, his need for disciples and adulation'.²⁴ If McLean clings to Western cultural models in interpreting Sri Ramakrishna, he similarly is militant about philosophical models. He writes that Sri Ramakrishna 'should have realized that a qualified non-dualism is a dualism, that one has to choose between dualism and non-dualism, and that there is no position between them or beyond both' (77). Because of McLean's insistence upon European univalent logic and methodology as the ultimate determiner of truth, he basically misses the boat on Sri Ramakrishna. This either/or binary may have a degree of validity in the Abrahamic traditions, but it is for the most part absent in the Hindu traditions.

We find this also with the current popular assessment of Sri Ramakrishna as a tantric rather than a Vedantin. McLean, along with Neevel and a number of other contemporary scholars, judge 'Ramakrishna's monism' to be 'Tantric monism rather than Vedantic Advaita' (xxx). While European univalent logic insists that one must be one *or* the other, this is not necessarily the case. As the historian Amiya Sen has written: 'Hindu religious philosophy ... speak[s] of an inner unity between the highest conclusions of both Tantra and Vedanta—after all Ramakrishna did speak of Brahman and Śakti as only two manifestations of the same Cosmic

Power.'²⁵ Advaita and tantra are not only not mutually exclusive, they have much more in common than is generally understood in Euro-American scholarship. Shankara's non-duality should not be set in opposition to tantric non-duality, but the current Euro-American academic response has largely sought a univalent formula to a religious tradition that is stubbornly multivalent.

June McDaniel's *Madness of the Saints* provides welcome relief from her academic contemporaries. Seeing Sri Ramakrishna as a model of divine madness, McDaniel notes that the very qualities that in Bengal would identify Sri Ramakrishna as a holy person possessed by divine madness are the same symptoms so often pathologized by Western-trained scholars. In fact, McDaniel points out that 'writers such as Jeffrey Masson ... emphasize the psychopathology of ecstatic and mystical states, assuming Western paradigms to be normative.'²⁶

Carl Olson's *Mysterious Play of Kālī* uses the concept of Kali's lila as a hermeneutical key for understanding Sri Ramakrishna. While not entirely unsympathetic, Olson's work stands in contrast to McDaniel's empathetic appraisal in its prodigious use of applied psychopathology and cultural misinterpretation. He describes touching Sri Ramakrishna's feet, for example, as an 'obsequious greeting'—apparently unaware that it is an extremely common way of showing respect. Showing little understanding of Indian culture, Olson identifies Sri Ramakrishna as a misogynist, but then suggests: 'Because Ramakrishna was a product of his culture, he inherited and espoused many of the negative attitudes toward women in general gained from his cultural heritage.'²⁷ Olson discusses at length 'Ramakrishna's unconscious fears' (44), which leads one to wonder how a contemporary North American could intuit the unconscious

of a Bengali mystic living over a century ago. As with other scholars, Olson obviates any possibility of cultural divergence between Bengal and North America, thus elevating the contemporary North American male psychological model to the status of the basic blueprint of human experience.

Sudhir Kakar's *Analyst and the Mystic* is much more sympathetic to mystical experience, even though he is a Western-trained psychoanalyst. Kakar criticizes Masson for viewing mysticism in terms of psychopathology, a view he does not share.²⁸ Kakar asserts that mysticism can be the prime venue of experiencing creativity: 'Mystical experience [is] ... —in some cultures and at certain historical periods—the preeminent way of uncovering the vein of creativity that runs deep in all of us' (29).

In other important areas also Kakar views Sri Ramakrishna through a much wider, more culturally accommodating lens than had earlier been used by his colleagues. For example, while some Western-trained scholars have viewed Sri Ramakrishna's practice of *madhura bhava* as symptomatic of a deeper psychological disorder—that is, discomfort with a masculine identity—Kakar sees his behaviour as belonging to a long tradition of both Western and Eastern mysticism. Yet, despite the insights Kakar provides, his views concerning human nature and mysticism inevitably become reductive to the extent that he largely accepts European psychological categories as universally valid. He sees, for example, mystical experiences as regression—a 'deeper regression', no doubt, but regression nonetheless (x).

While McDaniel's and Kakar's nuanced interpretations allow for transcendence, Narasingha Sil's two books, *Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahansa* and his later *Ramakrishna Revisited* (1998), begin with the premise that mystical experience is in-

herently pathological. Describing his tone as 'neo-Freudian'²⁹, he judges his book to be 'an exercise in psychobiography or ... psychohistory' (v). A professor of history at Western Oregon University, Sil grew up in Kolkata. He writes: 'My evolution from adolescence to adulthood was marked by a growing detachment—worse, disenchantment—with prophets and Godmen' (xi). We should not, then, be surprised when he writes that Sri Ramakrishna's 'trances were pathological rather than spiritual' (99), or that Sri Ramakrishna's 'neurosis or psychosis accounts for his theosis' (38).

Since both Masson and Sil posit that mystical experience is indicative of psychopathology, it is also not surprising that both men conjecture that Sri Ramakrishna experienced childhood trauma—Sil going as far as to suggest that the

What Sri Ramakrishna once said with regard to the nature of God seems to be applicable to his own self. His wonderful divine life presents a rare combination and synthesis of various types of religious experience and spiritual realizations. It is almost impossible for ordinary men to appreciate it fully or to describe all its sides and aspects adequately. So it is that today we sometimes find very different ideas and opinions about him current even among educated and enlightened men. Of course, all of them admit and proclaim that he effected a permanent reconciliation and unification of all faiths. But they do not seem to realize clearly what in Sri Ramakrishna's life was the real ground of this reconciliation. He was the living embodiment of almost all types of spiritual realizations—a fact which put him in a position to appreciate and honour all the religions of the world.

—Dr S C Chatterjee, 'Sri Ramakrishna: A Life of Manifold Spiritual Realization', in *A Bridge to Eternity*, 269

trauma extended up to Tota Puri. Again, like Masson, Sil begins with the assumption that Sri Ramakrishna's behaviour exhibits symptoms of psychopathology, then works backward to find ratifying evidence.

Without doubt the interpreter of Sri Ramakrishna who has attracted the greatest attention in recent years has been Jeffrey J Kripal, the author of *Kālī's Child*. Building upon the theses of Sil, Masson, and Neevel, Kripal takes to the hermeneutic of suspicion as he claims to reveal the 'secret' that has been hidden for over a century: that Sri Ramakrishna was 'a conflicted, unwilling homoerotic Tāntrika'.³⁰ Claiming that Swami Nikhilananda's Gospel is bowdlerized—a 'cleaned-up', censored text—Kripal professes to support this claim by 'recovering the text', that is, by going to the original *Kathamrita* to uncover Sri Ramakrishna's 'secret'. What is truly peculiar here is the idea that the *Kathamrita* had to be 'recovered' in the first place. After all, the large majority of the book's readers read the text in the original Bengali—not the English translation. Moreover, Kripal was reading the thirty-first edition of the *Kathamrita* (363), and he hardly purchased it secretly under the table. The implication here is that the English readers are the only readers who count.

Unfortunately for Kripal, his Bengali lags well behind his philosophical speculations, for as his Kolkata Bengali tutor noted, Kripal's Bengali was 'fairly elementary' and after eight months in India, it did not advance 'beyond the intermediate stage'. His tutor also noted his lack of knowledge of Indian culture.³¹ The lack of linguistic and cultural background could account for Kripal's prejudicial translations, which veer the reader toward his homoerotic thesis. Hence, *vyakulata*—longing or yearning for God—is idiosyncratically translated as 'anxious

desire' or 'erotic torment'. *Tan*—a pull or tug—is, according to *Kālī's Child*, Sri Ramakrishna's 'dual desire for God and male disciples'.³² *Uddipan*, which means spiritually enkindled—from *dipa*, light—is translated as 'aroused' or 'sexual excitement'. Interestingly, Narasingha Sil has been extremely critical of *Kālī's Child* and Kripal's homoerotic thesis. Sil describes the book as 'a classic example of what happens when an author's clever use of dictionary, index card and intelligence without an understanding of the history and culture of people other than his ethnic group ... produces a psychoanalysis of the mystical-spiritual experience of a saint from another religion and culture'.³³

Carl-A Keller's *Ramakrishna et la Voie de l'Amour* presents Sri Ramakrishna as a man firmly grounded in the Bengal bhakti tradition and suggests that Sri Ramakrishna may have been India's last authentic representative of the bhakti tradition.³⁴ Keller not only believes interpretations that cast Sri Ramakrishna as a Shankara Advaitin to be flawed, he also rejects interpretations that cast Sri Ramakrishna in a tantric light, notably *Kālī's Child*. Keller, a Protestant theologian, Hinduism scholar, and Bengali reader nevertheless leans on Narasingha Sil's biographical speculations in his presentation of Sri Ramakrishna, which mar his interpretation and lead him to make fairly elementary biographical errors.

Interpretations Ahead

As we review the history of Ramakrishna studies, we see persistent presumptions of the universality of contemporary Western social and cultural values, which have been forced into service as an unexamined pattern for interpreting Sri Ramakrishna. Psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool has come to be widely utilized in Ramakrishna studies and only rarely


has that approach been questioned. Indeed, so pervasive is this methodology that its cultural presuppositions have almost never been examined. It is no accident that this sort of heavy-handed hermeneutical stance has been increasingly viewed as a sort of neo-orientalism, in the sense that the presumption of the universality of Western values and standards can be seen as yet another form of Euro-American cultural domination.

We should remember, however, not to take this situation too personally. Hindu religious figures have not been singled out for the hermeneutic of suspicion. Christianity has faced much of its brunt. For example, the famed Jesus Seminar declared that, according to modern biblical scholarship, much of what is found in the New Testament is either fabricated by later interpreters—for various psychological, social, or political reasons—or is simply unreliable. This has hardly sat well with Christian theologians or Christian believers.

It should also be noted that, even apart from interpretations within the fold of the Ramakrishna Mission, there have been notable Indian scholars who also sought to ‘find the explanation’. Historians Sumit Sarkar and Partha Chatterjee have provided in different ways political, historical, and social backdrops to Sri Ramakrishna and his times.³⁵ Amiya Sen, another historian, has also done thoughtful work on ‘finding the explanation’, providing both a nuanced historical background as well as an empathetic approach that allows for transcendence.³⁶

While a decade ago the outlook appeared more dire, today in the Western academy the winds of change are again beginning to blow Ramakrishna studies in a different direction. In recent years a number of Western scholars, who are also Hindu religious practitioners, have come out of the religious closet, which until recently

was an act that could adversely affect one’s career. In addition, there has been a postmodern turn emphasizing the need for scholars to be transparent in their religious identity. Since there is no such thing as ‘scholarly objectivity’, openness and transparency are required so that the reader can see where the scholar is situated vis-à-vis her or his subject matter.

There is also hope for the future of academic Ramakrishna studies in the beginnings of a theology based upon the philosophy of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition. Jeffery Long has ably begun this process with his excellent *Vision for Hinduism*.³⁷ What is required is that more practitioners of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition participate in the process. Nature abhors a vacuum, and unless interpretations are provided and articulated on behalf of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition, someone else will fill the vacuum. And, as we have seen in the course of this brief survey, we will not like much of what we encounter. Encouragement and direction should be given to young potential scholars to take up this important work, rather than directing every bright young student to become either a doctor or an engineer. The work of interpretation is crucial and the effects of interpretations can last for generations. It is up to us to make sure that fair and balanced views of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition are available to the world. It is the least we can do to repay the bounty the tradition has given us. 

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Renewing the Study of Ramakrishna: A Proposal

Fr Francis X Clooney

IT IS AN HONOUR TO CONTRIBUTE to this special issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*, looking forward to 2011 as the 175th birth year of Sri Ramakrishna and the 125th anniversary of his passing. This is a fitting occasion on which to connect this moment of remembrance with our own time and place. For it is a good moment for us to reflect on his contribution to the religious and spiritual traditions of India and the wider world, and to assess how his legacy will remain vibrant so many years after his birth and death. For this we need to reflect on the ways in which Ramakrishna was recognized as of the greatest significance in the decades after his death and in the early writings about him—and how in various ways our world and ourselves have changed since then—so that, while his greatness is not to be doubted, the explanation of it may well have to be adjusted, updated. We do no service to his memory and truth if we simply repeat that his significance is enduring and ever relevant. Even if the truth is unchanging, what is eternally true may be only vaguely felt, and lack impact in particular times and places, such as ours. Claims about this great figure of the nineteenth century may accordingly end up sounding like pointers to a fond relic, ever more faded, the souvenir of the particular time and place

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when the message was first heard. It will not help us *now* if Ramakrishna is honoured simply as an influential figure *then*.¹

What new thinking is required of us if his wisdom and holiness are to gain full force in 2011? There is no general answer, I think; only by raising a series of smaller topics can we make specific real progress. There are many such themes that could be introduced, but here I will discuss just three: differences between the political and social, cultural and religious contexts of nineteenth-century Bengal and our world today; the theological questions that still arise regarding Ramakrishna's commitment to *sadhana* and what this tells us about his identity as *avatara* and human being; and the importance of the fact that Ramakrishna was a devout worshipper of Kali. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Ramakrishna's World Then and Now

First, we need to note and take seriously the important differences between the political and social, cultural and religious contexts of nineteenth-century Bengal and of our world today. It is obvious that times have changed. Ramakrishna's world was quite different from ours, and religion cannot be entirely separated from the politics and culture that surround it; colonialism is over, the world is intricately interconnected, religions have spread far from their native places, and both material and spiritual economies have changed everywhere. These changes matter, even if deeper spiritual truths

seem ever the same, since we can receive those truths only in accord with who we are in our time and place.

Thus, when we read the opening pages of Swami Saradananda's *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*,² we see how important for him was the sharp difference between India and the West, and we are struck by his trenchant judgment that the West has become materialistic and lost its spiritual grounding, while India, even when suffering British rule and forced westernization, has remained always and essentially a spiritual culture, of which Ramakrishna is the foremost exemplar in this age.

But surely these estimates of India and the West are due for an update. First, at our best, we should be reluctant to make sweeping generalizations about cultures, ours or others. Moreover, except in some very general sense, the projects and problems of nineteenth-century Calcutta, and perceptions of the West from there, are unlikely to match our insights—even if we are living in Kolkata! Given changes in India and the West, and a century-plus of new thinking in both the material as well as spiritual cultures of India and the West, it is no longer plausible to see Ramakrishna's contribution in light of a simple, or simplistic, renaissance of a spiritual India against a materialist West. The message today cannot be merely a repetition of the notion that India as a geographical place is special because it is the home of the Sanatana Dharma, any more than we should say that Palestine is in some essential and inevitable way a land of peace. Nor should we tolerate today the charge of an essentially materialistic West, as if Europeans or North Americans were somehow essentially less spiritual than Indians. Similarly, some of the charged political issues Saradananda was rightly concerned about are less urgent: no thoughtful person would try today to revive European

domination of Asia or defend a colonialist missionary dismissal of all things Hindu.

Works such as *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* succeeded because they spoke to the hearts and minds of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indians and Westerners; Saradananda himself chose how to interpret Ramakrishna's life as he judged best for that era and those readers. But if so, rephrasing his message is necessary if it is to remain relevant today. Today we have our own complicated views of the relationship of the spiritual and the material. We do not, or should not, expect simplistic contrasts such as 'the spiritual East and the material West' to hold up. There is no urgent political agenda that makes it necessary to keep proving that India has its place on the world stage or that Hinduism is a serious religion. India does occupy a place of growing importance on the world stage, and Hinduism is flourishing all over the globe. Moreover, every nation and culture is increasingly filled with people from other places, and these immigrants and refugees bring with them their religions too. Traditional and fixed religious affiliations have weakened in the West, while Asian religions are far more popular in the West than before. Many young people are eclectic, devising spiritual paths that draw on the wisdom of Christianity and Hinduism. Globalization, mass migrations, climate change, the privatization of religion as a personal sentiment, a relativism by which everyone, or no one, is divine—these are issues that religiously dedicated intellectuals need to be thinking about, since they change the context in which any religious idea is received.

Once we recognize such changes and admit their importance, the hard intellectual work can begin. It becomes important to identify and think through the issues that frame today's understanding of religions and cultures, and

on that basis to ask how we are to speak about Ramakrishna—or Jesus, or any religious figure of the highest importance—in a way relevant to what we now think about the divine and human, religions in different parts of the world, current tensions between material advancement and spiritual depth, and so on. It seems entirely appropriate that the great tradition of Ramakrishna be a key starting point for reflection on today's burning issues, but this means that the heirs of Saradananda must restate his basic concerns to ensure they seem not antiquated but relevant in today's world.

Ramakrishna's Sadhanas

A second issue where fresh thinking is needed has to do with the significance of Ramakrishna's sadhanas. What are we to make of the fact that for a major portion of his adult life he was engaged in sadhanas aimed at spiritual advancement? Did Ramakrishna, as a spiritual practitioner intent upon spiritual learning, actually discover something new about himself, his identity, and his mission because of those sadhanas? For it is not immediately clear how a person can manifest a sure and certain spiritual identity, even sure perfection, as did Ramakrishna—and yet at the same time be really engaged in practices aimed at spiritual advancement. What are the conditions under which sadhana is possible and necessary, even for a spiritually advanced person?

This issue too was a live one for Saradananda in the *Divine Play*. In his introduction to the second part of that work he insists, against the sceptics of his day, that Ramakrishna was truly human and not merely seeming to be so. Indeed, he insists that readers will not feel the full impact of Ramakrishna's sadhanas unless they agree that an avatara becomes truly human, and as a real human being experiences real human needs, uncertainty, dependence on others, and the ob-

scuration of consciousness, and hence needs to strive for human perfection. Saradananda repeatedly drives home the point that the imperfections of the avatara, even if chosen freely by the divinity, are not 'for show' but are real.

He notes that people are reluctant to attribute imperfections to avataras, yet they too are touched by 'hope and hopelessness, fear and awe, and joy and longing'; they can also suffer elation and depression. Some, he admits, even deny that Ramakrishna suffered terminal cancer, as if he were only putting on a show for the sake of his devotees, as if to give meaning to their suffering by his appearance of likewise suffering with them. But the avatara's efforts are *not* pretence since, as Ramakrishna said, 'when God incarnates, all of His actions become like those of ordinary humans. He assumes a human body and attains perfection through zeal, self-effort, and austerity like other human beings' (150). Otherwise, Saradananda adds, there would be no point in God's assuming a human body. It is not necessary to deny imperfection in avataras, or to deny that avataras benefited from effort. He even insists that avataras 'to a great extent experience our short-sightedness and limited knowledge. Like us, they must struggle to discover a path to liberation from all those limitations. Until that path is discovered, the awareness of their divine nature sometimes manifests from within, but only momentarily—a veil then covers it up. Thus, for the good of many they accept the veil of maya and, like us, grope along the path in this realm of light and darkness' (151). Were Ramakrishna not fully human and not really sharing our human situation, we would be disheartened by his perfection, and we would suffer apathy instead of energy in trying to emulate him (152). Only if the imperfections and struggle are real, will devotees take heart when they themselves undertake sadhanas for the sake of advancement.

Yet, Saradananda also suggests that when we are advanced in insight, we will see Ramakrishna as perfect and divine—even beyond all our categories, *nirvikalpa*. This loftier language makes it sound as if Ramakrishna's sadhanas are indeed 'only' for our sake and not something that he had to undertake for his own benefit too. In fact, upon a second reading, it is hard to see where Saradananda allows for any *moral or spiritual* imperfections in Ramakrishna, the kind of imperfections usually remedied by sadhana.³ Even as he stresses Ramakrishna's humanity, Saradananda keeps presenting Ramakrishna as the ever all-knowing, perfectly aware teacher. So one might just as well conclude, from Saradananda's discussion of sadhanas, that Ramakrishna really did engage in spiritual practice only to set a good example for others, not for his own sake; for embodied divinities have nothing to learn.

So the question is open still: did Ramakrishna need to undertake sadhanas or not? I do not mean to say that devotees in the tradition should wonder whether Ramakrishna was human and divine, but I do suggest that we are better off if we think more about how to explain that he is both at once. What does it mean to say that Ramakrishna was truly and fully human, himself personally on the path of sadhana? What does this tell us about divinity and the true meaning of avatara?

As compared to other contemporary or near-contemporary figures who also upheld religious cosmopolitanism, Ramakrishna had the distinction of being a sadhaka, a man who could rest his claim on demonstrated experience.

—Amiya P Sen, *His Words: The Preachings and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, 205

To say that such questions still need to be asked, and debated in accord with what we think now about human nature and divinity, is not in any way to blame Saradananda. As indicated, his writing provokes the very questions I am raising, nor is the matter entirely different from a key question that has vexed Christian theologians for millennia: how could Jesus be divine and human at the same time—and not just a holy man chosen by God or a divinity pretending to share the human drama? Such issues are deep enough that they require more study, even now. Scholars within the tradition of Ramakrishna and unaligned scholars who are open-minded and sympathetic to the problematic of spiritual exercise and search can, I suggest, devote new energy to exploring what kind of human being an avatara is—with attention to what we mean by 'human being' in 2011—and what the sadhana is for. If we do this, the payoff will be great, as today's seekers will be able to take to heart what he teaches us about God and humanity, and how these realities intersect in particular ways in extraordinary persons.

Ramakrishna's Worship of Kali

Third, we do well to reflect more deeply on the fact that Ramakrishna was a devout worshipper of Kali, and be more generous in noticing that this worship was central to his identity then and his legacy now. I must be clear here on what I intend, lest I be thought to be trying to prove the obvious. Of course it is no secret that Ramakrishna did worship Kali and never ceased to do so during his lifetime, and the Vedanta Societies have been perfectly clear on this from the start. Nor did Ramakrishna's Advaitic experiences interfere with his worship of his Mother. We also know that this worship made sense as a strand of religious devotion and practice in nineteenth-century Bengal. So, there is no question of my

disclosing some unknown or suppressed truth about Ramakrishna. But I do wish to suggest that it may be appropriate now to give more central, public prominence to the worship of Kali.⁴

The perception of Goddess worship is not now what it was in 1900. Certainly, Western attitudes toward Hindu goddesses have changed enormously. That one might worship a goddess is not today seen as shocking or taboo or esoteric as it would have been a century ago, and few will dismiss Kali as an evil spectre or ugly monster. Encountering Kali is certainly less controversial than it would have been when Ramakrishna was first introduced in the West. Many are attracted to goddesses and ritual worship of goddesses, and even those who will never worship goddesses are much more conscious of why such worship takes place. Even Christians, who do not worship a Divine Mother, have a better idea of what we lose when we do not worship God as mother, or when we even exclude the feminine from our understanding of the divine Person. The reality and worship of goddesses is a more compelling topic among thoughtful religious people than it has been for millennia in the West, and some respected theologians are insisting that 'God' be rethought with more room for 'Goddess' as well. Today, then, it is opportune to say more, more prominently, about Ramakrishna's worship of Kali as central to his identity and global message, as a way of (re)connecting his heritage to some of the liveliest religious and academic conversations now taking place.

Perhaps there are practical implications too. It is timely also to rethink the meaning of the practices of the Vedanta Societies in light of today's discussions on gender and the divine, even daring to give to Societies a higher profile in religiously sensitive feminist circles.⁵ Perhaps Sunday sermons, magazine publications, and other public programmes might become less focused on Ved-


anta terminology and more forthright in highlighting Kali worship as key to the intellectual heritage of Ramakrishna. Even more practically, perhaps the Sunday Vedanta Centre services in the West, which generally have the character of late nineteenth-century Protestant church services, might be revamped with a more 'Catholic' ethos, so as to include more ritual worship—and primary among those, the worship of Kali as a central public event. Moreover, even if we step away from the context of the West, the same point may be worth considering even in India today: would the great Ramakrishna ashramas in India too profit from more public worship of the Goddess? For even there Western tastes affected the beginnings of the Order and its practices; the 'West' and its tastes were powerful in early twentieth-century India too. It may be today that even the Indian population would appreciate the moderate but intense devotion to Kali the ashramas would put to the fore.⁶

Reconsidering Ramakrishna

Beyond the three issues I have introduced here, many other issues would arise in a timely reconsideration of Ramakrishna in this anniversary year. For example, a reconsideration of Advaita Vedanta as possessed of an intellectual history, an Advaita that cannot be discussed merely in general and ahistorical terms, as if it has been entirely the same for thousands of years; the relevance of Ramakrishna amidst new Hindu movements in India and the West and in the face of Hindutva; the role of women as leaders—or not—in the Vedanta Centres, particularly in the West; and so on. But I have said enough for a short essay.

In conclusion, let me restate my purpose in these reflections. Beyond my desire to honour the editor's gracious request to contribute to this issue of *Prabuddha Bharata*, I have been raising a series of questions that bring to bear intellectual

and religious reflection on the contexts—political and social, cultural and religious—in which we honour Ramakrishna 175 years after his birth. I have pointed to the real danger today of Ramakrishna fading into the past, still revered by many, but primarily as an avatara of *then* and not of *now*, a key figure in the renewal of Hinduism in nineteenth-century Bengal and in the waning of colonialism, but just a sweet memory now. While religious figures of great significance live on in many ways, one real way to honour them is to ask fresh and intellectually strenuous questions that cannot be answered simply by repeating time-honoured principles. If we attend to issues such as those I have raised, I am confident that it will be possible to make great strides in ensuring that Ramakrishna will remain a figure of great influence in the twenty-first-century world of spirituality too.

And to close with a different kind of observation: I am hopeful in part that this is a special moment in the history of thinking about Ramakrishna because of the recent release of *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited* by Pravrajika Vrajaprana and Swami Tyagananda. This very important and constructive work puts in perspective older and new writing about Ramakrishna, including the contributions of both outsiders and insiders to the tradition, and provides a solid and sensible base for thinking about the history of the study of Ramakrishna—the history that is essential to moving forward. *Interpreting Ramakrishna* is surely the most comprehensive consideration to date of the traditions around Ramakrishna and a bridge to the kind of reconsideration I am suggesting here. 

Notes and References

1. In all that follows it must be understood that I am thinking and writing out of my American and Roman Catholic background. I have the highest

respect for Ramakrishna and his disciples, and have thought about him for some thirty years now—but nonetheless am aware of my limits, as a friendly ‘visitor’ to this tradition and not a practitioner in it. So I hope that readers will make allowance for interpretations or ideas that may seem odd from an insider’s perspective.

2. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003).
3. Yes, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* does give us some sense of Ramakrishna’s frailties. Ramakrishna was subject to great changes in mood, he lacked proper guidance in times of need, his health was uncertain. The second part of the book includes several instances of Ramakrishna’s real need: he was confused as to the meaning of his spiritual experiences (233); he suffered physical ailments, such as the danger of high blood pressure (239); he did not understand his own states (258). And, I might add, can we not see his dying of cancer, so prominent in the latter part of the book, as a last and most potent sadhana?
4. In raising this point, I am assuming that to understand Ramakrishna is inevitably to think deeply about Kali, since, in my view, his life makes sense only in its orientation to Kali.
5. Here too we can pay attention to the vast array of scholarship on goddesses and on Kali as opening new ways of understanding Ramakrishna himself. I think here for instance of the work of June McDaniel on the saints of Bengal *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal*, Rachel McDermott’s translations of Kali poetry and analysis of it—*Singing to the Goddess: Poems to Uma and Kali from Bengal and Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams: Transformations of Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal*, as well as the very fine collection of essays on Kali she edited with Jeffrey Kripal *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. If such work helps us to understand Kali better, then surely it also helps us to understand better the worshipper of the Goddess too.
6. Once more here, my ‘Catholic bias’ has come to the fore. I hope readers will be willing to think through the issue I am raising, even while mindful of my particular perspective.

Philip Glass on Sri Ramakrishna

Dr Kusumita P Pedersen

THE WORLD-RENOWNED COMPOSER Philip Glass has been an admirer of Sri Ramakrishna for most of his life. One expression of his regard for Sri Ramakrishna is a major piece for chorus and orchestra, *The Passion of Ramakrishna*, now in progress. Music for about half of the libretto has been composed. This first version can stand as a self-contained work; the full-length piece will be completed in the not too distant future. The world premiere of the *Passion of Ramakrishna* was performed by the Pacific Symphony, conducted by Carl St Clair, at the Orange County Performing Arts Center south of Los Angeles in September 2006. It was also performed early in 2007 by the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. The libretto is drawn almost entirely from Swami Nikhilananda's translation of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and is compiled and edited by Kusumita P Pedersen. On 4 February 2010 she interviewed Philip Glass at his home. Following are selections from their conversation.

Kusumita: How did you first hear of Sri Ramakrishna?

Philip: I've known his work for fifty years. I believe it was in 1957 or 1958. There was a Dr Mishra, who had evening lectures and meditation classes at his apartment on East 29th Street. He was a handsome fellow, probably in his fifties, and he was a medical doctor trained in Western psychiatry. He was also a yogi and a teacher of meditation. He had weekly meetings in his

home and I started to go there with a friend of mine. It was probably through him that I heard of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*.

The other person from whom I could possibly have learned about it was a man named Yogi Vithaldas who, I only recently found out, was the teacher of Yehudi Menuhin. I met him also at about the same time, 1957. He made me a vegetarian, which I've been since then. These two, Dr Mishra and Yogi Vithaldas, were very authentic, well trained in their own tradition, and comfortable living in New York. At that time, you have to remember, there were not yoga studios on every block. In fact, the way I found Vithaldas with my friend Michel Zeltzman was this: We were interested in yoga, we didn't know much about it and we thought we'd find out about it, but we couldn't find any yoga teachers in New York. We ended up looking in the white section of the telephone pages under the letter 'Y'—and there he was, Yogi Vithaldas. And we called him up. You really had to look around for this kind of thing; people weren't doing it then. The Beatles hadn't gone to India yet, nor had Allen Ginsberg gone to India, so that whole wave had yet to take place. Actually, my friend Michel and I, we were the first wave! [laughing] It was a very small wave, two guys. We began to read the Vedas and some of the Mahabharata, and the translations were quite good. These had been translated by the English for generations; they were good translations, so there was not a problem. Michel was a practising nurse in Johns Hopkins Hospital. He passed away just two years ago. We knew each other from those very early days. There were just a few

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people, but the handful of people who would go to persons like Dr Mishra or Yogi Vithaldas were intensely interested in the subject, and we shared what we knew; so who knows? Someone could have passed the book to me. It would have been in my early twenties, more than fifty years ago.

Kusumita: So, was it then that you started reading the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*?

Philip: Yes. I started reading it then and I've never stopped. I have the big volume and I also have the abbreviated one, which is quite handy, because you can take it on short trips, on the subway, you can read it anywhere. The big book is something to lug around. You've seen my copies—they're extremely well worn.

Kusumita: I remember when we first met to start working on Symphony No. 5. I know what the book looks like, and when you came into the office of the Interfaith Center of New York, I immediately noticed that you were bearing this book, and I thought, 'Hmm'. That was in 1997.

Philip: Is it the Vedanta Society that has kept it in print?

Kusumita: Swami Nikhilananda's centre publishes it. He translated it into English and he also founded that centre [The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York].

Philip: To me, it's quite a good translation, but you have to understand, it's the only one I know.

Kusumita: Sri Chinmoy praised it highly. Bengali was his mother language, and he said that it is as if Sri Ramakrishna is speaking English.

Philip: Yes, I think it's very good. When I say I never stopped reading it, I had the habit—and I still do—I'd say every three or four years, I'll pick it up and I'll begin perhaps looking for a passage that I want to see, but once I open the book and read that passage, I just keep going. I've read it numerous times. The idea of a musical work based on the text formed in my mind very, very slowly over a long period of time. I only

found the form for it just shortly before you and I began working on it.

Kusumita: It's curious to me that you should say that, because your work has involved setting to music words of all kinds. There's been such a tremendous array of different things that you have worked with, poetry and letters, scriptures and so much else. I'm wondering why this would have presented a special challenge.

Philip: Part of the problem of the piece is that the dates of the events that are transcribed are only a time span of five or six years. We don't have much verbatim report before that. But even so, the book is so extensive; Ramakrishna would answer the same question two or three different ways at different times. When I say I was trying to find a form for it, it's not a practical idea to think that you can set the whole thing. Even the abbreviated version runs to maybe four hundred pages. So I finally decided that I would do a piece that was about the death of Ramakrishna because, first of all, that's treated in great detail. This book [the *Gospel*] is really only about five years and this [the musical piece] is about the last six months of his life.

One of the things that is so appealing about Ramakrishna is that he was both a saintly man—or a God-man, an avatar, whatever you want to call it—but he was also a very ordinary man in some ways. He was capable of saying things like, when his disciples begged him, 'Master, why don't you just speak to the Divine Mother and ask her to spare your life, because she'll listen to you,' he said, 'I can't bother her with my problems.' But then he also said, 'You know, it is as if I'm living in a mansion and I'm going from one room to another.' I remember this one passage where he's eating some curds because his throat is sore, and he turns to the person who is with him and says, 'I remember a dream I had: the Mother came to me and she said, "Some day when you are dying

you'll be eating curds", and he said, 'Am I dying now?' and began weeping.¹ It's very moving that he could have different experiences of death. One is an experience which is way beyond what ordinary people can have, but he also certainly understood what ordinary people feel when they are looking at death. I find these kinds of personalities very interesting, the ones who seem in some ways very ordinary and in other ways beyond any description of what is ordinary.

Kusumita: The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is in large part about his last days, so to focus on his death is a natural idea, but did it come to you more after Allen Ginsberg died?

Philip: That could be.

Kusumita: I remember your saying at that time that you went to be with him during his last hours, and it came to you that the death of a great man is like watching a sunset.

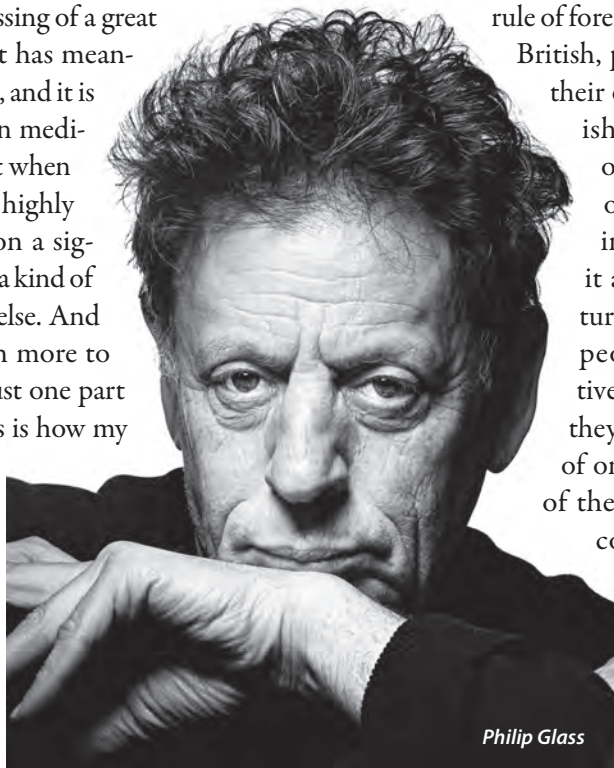
Philip: We wrote that in the programme book [for the premiere]. It was when I was with Allen when he was dying, and then later I referred to Ramakrishna ... the passing of a great man is something that has meaning for the whole world, and it is something that you can meditate on. The idea is that when the spirit of man is so highly evolved, death takes on a significance that becomes a kind of teaching for everyone else. And of course there's much more to Ramakrishna; this is just one part of my interest. But this is how my interest in him became crystallized and I could present it in a musical work.

Kusumita: I wanted to ask you more generally, just

how did Sri Ramakrishna become important to you so that you would go on reading his words?

Philip: You know, I just like the book. I became very attached to the person in the book, who is Ramakrishna. It's written in such a way that after a time he seems familiar to you. The character in the book becomes someone who you know—he becomes close to you in some way. I just felt that in a funny way I was getting to know him through the book and I kept reading it. It's like reading the letters of a friend, of someone who has passed away, and you have these letters and would read them over and over again just to have the memory of that person. I never knew Ramakrishna, of course there is no way we could have known him. But we know him through his works, we know him through his disciples, we know him through the effect that his life had on the development of modern India, a country which, you have to remember, in the nineteenth century had existed for more

than four hundred years under the rule of foreigners, the Mughals, the British, people who brought in their own religions. The British were very dismissive of Indian culture. Most of the British who were in India didn't think of it as a highly evolved culture. They thought of the people as rather primitive. They had no idea that they were living in the seat of one of the great cultures of the world. In fact, it was common for young Indians to learn English and not to speak the native language, and all this kind of



Philip Glass

things. And then, when Ramakrishna appeared suddenly, he seemed to speak, he did speak—it's not that he *seemed* to speak, he *did* speak—with the voice of the Vedas. It was the voice of the Puranas and the voice of the great teachers.

The astonishing thing is that he was not a highly educated man, but late in his life scholars from all over India would come to test his knowledge. They were astonished because he didn't refer to any texts, but they would ask him a question and he would give them an answer, and the answer was from his experience. The authenticity of his teaching was that it came from his own life. So, you have a man of this spiritual and intellectual stature and at the same time a very humble man, a simple man, living in a humble place and wearing very simple clothing, and the spiritual and intellectual history of India just poured out of him. I have often thought about this. When we think of genius, we think of Einstein or Mozart or Rembrandt; we think of scientists or musicians or painters. Mozart is a good example. Mozart seemed to speak the language of music. His father taught him, but at a very early age he was writing in a very sophisticated language. The fact is that in the spiritual world this can happen too, and this is exactly who Ramakrishna was. I could say he was the Mozart of India. You could look at it that way.

You could almost say it was in his DNA, it came into him and through him. There's a continuity of culture that can emerge in a person, and in this case a person who grew up in a small village. I think the appearance of Ramakrishna in any society would have been considered a miracle. That it happened in India was so important, because Indians needed to be reminded of their tradition, if I can put it that way. For four hundred years of foreign rule the great traditions of India were not treated with much respect, and then suddenly this person is there. I don't doubt that the Quit

India movement that Gandhi was part of would not have resonated in his time if it hadn't been for that. India was ready for an avatar, and they got one—it was Ramakrishna. And later they got Gandhi. These are not unconnected events.

Kusumita: There's also, of course, the expression of his teachings by Vivekananda.

Philip: Vivekananda was so self-possessed that he would go to Chicago or to London, dressed as an Indian and speak about Indian culture with authority. Having been so close to Ramakrishna, I would say that he must have felt completely empowered to do so. He had sat at the feet of one of the great living masters, who was a reflection of all the other masters. That was close to his heart, so he could speak about it with such authority.

Kusumita: Would you like to say something about the future of the *Passion of Ramakrishna*?

Philip: We have eleven parts and I've put six of them to music. I always meant the first version just to be the beginning, because I saw the piece would be a very big piece. I really feel that the piece needs the length of a whole evening. By taking a whole evening programme we can convey some of the gravity and weight of the great spirit of Ramakrishna. I don't think a forty-minute piece is adequate.

Kusumita: No, no. You want to immerse yourself more.

Philip: We're talking to people about commissioning the rest of the work. In Europe and North America there are some companies that are very interested. We hope to finish it after another two or three years.



Note

1. A slightly different version of the incident is available in M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 934–5.



Spiritual Mother-lines in India and the West

Dr Carol Lee Flinders

NEAR THE ASHRAMA where I live in northern California is a wildlife preserve that attracts waterbirds of all kinds. Some live there year round, others just drop in on their migratory routes. It is April as I write this, and walking there yesterday I counted no fewer than sixteen swans, some of them settled in so near the path that one could view them at close range.

I doubt whether anyone familiar with the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna—the Paramahansa, ‘Great Swan’—can feel nonchalant about sightings like this. The grace and natural majesty of swans, with the dazzling white of their feathers, stop us in our tracks, and words like ‘holy’ don’t feel out of place here.

But as I watched one nesting swan in particular, another dimension of that timeless simile revealed itself to me. Because contrary to literary or religious convention, she wasn’t the least bit serene or still. She stood alone on a round, flat

gray patch of ground strewn with feathers and chaff, grooming herself vigorously, when suddenly she pushed her broad, spatulate beak down into what I’d thought was terra firma. Flexing her long neck, she turned up an egg. She rolled it over, pushed it back into the soft mulch, made a quarter turn, and repeated the action with a second egg, a third, and a fourth. At last she flopped herself down on top of them, wriggling about a bit as if to push them all further down into the their nest.

Before long she stood up and repeated the whole process. For maybe fifteen minutes, her restless activity never abated. I guessed that she was turning the eggs over so that they would be kept evenly warm; a more knowledgeable friend told me later that her strategy would ensure that eggs laid over several days would all hatch at the same time. Watching her tireless goings on, I suddenly smiled, because I remembered two things at once, and their connection to one another is at the heart of what I want to write about.

God the Mother

First, I recalled the writings of Dame Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), the English anchoress

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who declared that ‘this fair lovely word “mother” is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things.’¹ God the Father may be the foundation of all things, wrote Julian, but God the *Mother*, as Jesus, busies herself continuously about our needs. ‘The mother’s service is nearest, readiest, and surest’, she writes, outlining at length all of Christ’s ‘sweet workings’ (ibid.). For Julian, that is, no description of God was adequate that ignored his maternal nature. And maternity, by her reckoning, is anything but passive.

The second thing I remembered is that Julian would have been right at home in the Indian spiritual tradition, which has always associated intense activity with the feminine principle—Shakti, the primordial cosmic energy behind all of creation. Had I been ignorant of India’s age-old celebration of God as the Divine Mother when I first read Dame Julian in 1970, I might have been as bewildered as most Westerners are by her blithe departure from mainstream Christian teachings. But through my own spiritual teacher, Sri Eknath Easwaran (1910–99),

I knew even before my first encounter with Julian about the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. I knew of his boundless devotion to the Divine Mother, and I also knew through the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* that he had displayed the vigilant tenderness of a mother toward his own devotees.

So as the sunlight gleamed off the water and the air rang with the eager cries of ducks, geese, and gulls, of phalaropes, avocets, and red-winged blackbirds, all intent on bringing new life into the world, everything came together. This was the life force, and it was also God manifest in the world. This was Shakti.

I am most honoured to have been invited to contribute to this special issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* and encouraged to think back over more than forty years of spiritual practice, reflection, scholarship, and writing that has been centred around feminine perspectives on the spiritual life, and within which Sri Ramakrishna has been a continuous, wonderfully inspiring presence.

I first became aware of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother Sarada Devi in the autumn of 1967, through my spiritual teacher Sri Eknath Easwaran. I was a graduate student in comparative literature at the University of California in Berkeley, and Sri Easwaran was giving meditation classes on the campus. He had come to Berkeley in 1959 as a Fulbright scholar, ostensibly to research the influence of the Indian mystical tradition on American Transcendentalists; but by the time I met him, eight years later, the scholarly phase of his life was well behind him. He had heard a deeper, more insistent calling, and embraced it without reservation.

Sri Easwaran must have sensed, even as he was setting out from India in 1959, that the whole direction of his life was changing. Why, otherwise, would this gifted writer and literary scholar

After spending many days in the company of Sri Ramakrishna, Pandit Shivanath Shastri said: ‘All of what Paramahamsadeva teaches can be found written in one book or the other; hence he may not be great because of his teachings. Then where does his greatness lie? Who else has the longing with which he falls down on the bank of the Ganga crying, “Mother, Mother”? ... A true monk imparts the message of love into the worldly minds of common people and strengthens them; Paramahamsadeva was also like that.’

—Nirmalkumar Ray,
Sri Sri Ramakrishna Samsparshe, 58–9

have brought only one book for the two-month-long voyage—not Shakespeare's plays or the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, but the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*? His love of the *Gospel* never flagged. I can't imagine how many times he must have read it—I know that he read it aloud in evening classes at our ashrama many, many times, from cover to cover, pausing on every page to comment on what was happening and explain it to his enthralled but sometimes bewildered young American students.

As a woman—remember, this was Berkeley in the late nineteen sixties!—I was thrilled to learn for the first time about a spiritual tradition going back thousands of years that celebrated the feminine aspect of God without qualification or inhibition.

The method of meditation that Sri Easwaran taught is called 'passage meditation': one commits to memory inspirational passages from all the great mystical traditions and then repeats them silently, eyes closed and spinal column erect, bringing attention gently back to the words of the passage whenever it wanders. What a joy it was to memorize some of the songs Sri Ramakrishna had loved—for instance, 'The black bee of my mind is drawn in sheer delight / To the blue lotus flower of Mother Shyama's feet'—and then absorb them at a deeper level in morning and evening meditation.

Over the ensuing decades, under Sri Easwaran's guidance, we would learn much more about the various manifestations of the Divine Mother in India's tradition—in the Mahabharata and Ramayana, in mythology and poetry—but especially in the lives of women like Mirabai (c.1498–c.1547) and Andal (8th cent. CE) as well as, of course, Sri Sarada Devi. We studied Swami Nikhilananda's biography of the Holy Mother and many of us memorized for use in meditation the simple, potent piece of spiritual instruction

that is believed to comprise her last words: 'I tell you one thing: If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather learn to see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this whole world is your own.'

The rigours of living in community can be severe at times: when anger starts to erupt, sarcastic remarks are on the tip of the tongue. But the effect of having those blessed words close at hand from morning meditation—'No one is a stranger, my child'—was almost like having Holy Mother slip up next to me and carry me safely through the moment.

Unbroken Women's Tradition

If Sri Easwaran was particularly alert to the stature of Sri Sarada Devi, who lived very much in the background of the Ramakrishna movement, his own upbringing in a large matrilineal family in rural Kerala would undoubtedly go a long way towards explaining it. His own spiritual teacher was his mother's mother, 'Granny' in the many stories he used to tell us about his childhood. She called him 'Little Lamp' and told him, to his bewilderment, that he would one day be 'the king's messenger'. 'You had to wait until you were students at Berkeley to find your teacher,' he used to tell us, teasingly. 'But I was born into my teacher's arms.' Of his mother, Granny's gentle 'teaching assistant,' he said 'I never heard her say a harsh word to anyone, or about anyone.' Granny herself, he allowed, was rather blunt!

Regarding the customs around matrilineal family structures, he brushed aside the kind of questions that might have interested anthropologists, telling us that 'it wasn't just that name and property were passed down from mother to daughter, though they were. No, what you have to understand is that spiritual awareness flowed down that mother-line, like a river.' When a

daughter of the Eknath family married, she and her husband would set up housekeeping in the family compound or close by. Remaining in close daily contact with her mother, her sisters, her aunties, and her granny, she could go on absorbing and passing on all the small, but hugely important things, that the women of such a lineage know: how to make feather-light idlis, how to care for a feverish child or a cow that is calving, the lullabies, and more than anything else, the stories.

Every evening, Sri Easwaran recalled, the sacred juncture of day and night called *sandhya* would find him sitting in Granny's lap, rapt while she told stories from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagavata that she had absorbed in the same way in her own childhood. Looking back, he realized that by the time he had left home at sixteen, he had absorbed through this endless stream of narrative the core teachings of India's timeless spiritual tradition; though of course, he always added, he was far from *knowing* that he had.

Sri Easwaran's grandmother had of course shed her body well before he came to the United States. But during the early nineteen seventies his mother came to live with us at the ashrama, bringing his two young nieces along. Every evening, at *sandhya*, she would sit with a little girl on each side and tell them about Rama and Sita, Radha and Krishna, Arjuna and Draupadi and Kunti. We saw first-hand that the 'river of spiritual awareness' our teacher had told us about was in a very real sense a river of story as well—inexhaustible, handed down with utmost care from one generation of women to the next for hundreds of years.

Tradition in Kerala holds that 'woman is the lamp of the home', and while most of us would receive the saying as a charming metaphor, Sri Easwaran's experience as a little boy had ren-

dered it quite literal for him. In tropical countries, he explained, night comes on abruptly. The members of his extended family would be sitting on the veranda chatting amiably about the day when suddenly they could barely see one another: already, though, one of the women would have gone inside and come back out carrying a small brass lamp filled with coconut oil—its soft flame lighting her face gently from below. For just a few seconds the conversation would stop.

One of Sri Easwaran's first American students was a talented painter. Working with this vignette and the one existing photograph of Granny, she produced an almost life-sized rendering of her, holding a brass lamp in just the way Sri Easwaran had described. The portrait hung behind him for years as he gave his lectures in Berkeley.

Taken together, Sri Easwaran's accounts of his own upbringing merged with the stories from India's great epics and the poems of Mirabai, and all of that rich material became a vast, vivid backdrop against which I would read and ponder the life stories and teachings of the great women saints of the Western tradition. I came to see that it's been primarily *through* our women mystics that the West has had any access at all to the direct, vernacular, and narrative-driven spirituality that has engaged and sustained Indian women for thousands of years. In the space remaining, I will touch upon just a few of the ways in which the 'lamp' of that tradition has illuminated my own.

Flowing Godhead

The imagery of rivers and streams is of course far richer than I have been able to convey, in the West as well as the East. What could be more natural than to compare a river, sustaining the life of an entire region, with a woman whose love sustains her family and community? Cer-

tainly the people of Assisi felt that way about Saint Clare (1194–1253), whose eulogist called her ‘a clear stream of bounty flowing through the Valley of Spoleto’. Many of India’s great rivers are associated with goddesses: Jamuna, for instance, Narmada, Godavari, Kaveri, Ganga, and of course the mysterious Saraswati, long believed to flow underground until satellite photos picked out its dry riverbed and geologists determined that her flow was probably blocked by a long-ago earthquake near its source in the foothills of the Himalayas. As ‘the one who flows’, Saraswati presides over poetry, music, mathematics, and intuition.

No mystic I have studied was more enthralled with the imagery of fluidity than Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210–97), whose poetry is often compared with that of India’s Mirabai. In her writings, collected under the title *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, water, wine, milk, blood, honey, light, molten gold, fire, God’s love, human desire, and of course grace itself *as* water, fire, and light were in constant evidence:

Wouldst thou know my meaning?
Lie down in the Fire
See and taste the Flowing
Godhead through thy being;
Feel the Holy Spirit
Moving and compelling
Thee within the Flowing
Fire and light of God.²

Does this imagery tell us something important about women’s spirituality? A least one of Mechthild’s contemporaries believed it did. Of ‘woman’ in general he wrote that because her understanding is simpler and her heart gentler, ‘in her desire she understands better / The wisdom flowing from Heaven / Than does a hard man / Who is clumsy in these things.’³

Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–82) too was en-

She [Binodini Dasi] considered her acting in the role of Chaitanya as her greatest achievement, since it brought the highest blessing from Sri Ramakrishna, which opened up a new realm of fulfilment in her life. Quite justifiably she spoke of this as the greatest event of her life. She used to say later: ‘For this reason I consider this body fortunate. Even if the whole world should scoff at me, I would not mind it. For I am aware that the highly respected Ramakrishna Paramahansa blessed me.’

—Swami Prabhananda,
First Meetings with Sri Ramakrishna, 336–7

thralled with rivers and streams. She used to say she meditated best sitting next to a stream. And when she set out to explain in her autobiography the subtle relationship in contemplative practice between divine grace and the individual’s own striving, she developed a powerful explanatory metaphor. The soul is a garden, she explains, where God has planted the seeds of spiritual awareness. We must keep it watered, and at first all we can do is dig for water: it is hard, unrelenting work, and we think we are on our own. In time, though, when we attain to ‘the prayer of quiet’, it is as if we had installed a system of water wheels. There is more water now and less struggle. As we open out still more to divine grace, it is as if our little garden were surrounded and crisscrossed with canals, and we merely direct the flow, for God is the gardener now. At last, in the prayer of union, it is as if the heavens opened and rain of divine grace poured down upon the little plant of spiritual awareness.

Saint Teresa also loved the inherently feminine imagery of enclosure. Writing for women in particular, she loved to invoke images like beehives, cocoons, treasure chests, and of course, in her

masterwork *The Interior Castle*, a palace full of rooms made entirely out of a diamond or clear crystal. Each of these images is of the human soul and seeks to convey how foolish we are when we believe we are our bodies. My feeling has always been that she knew very well that women who had vowed themselves to celibacy might feel wistful at times because their own wombs would never carry a child. By living in *prayerful enclosure*, Teresa is saying—by having the privilege of complete privacy in a cell that no one could enter without the prioress' permission—women could enter into their own depths and discover the unimaginable wealth of a fully developed interior life.

I have always felt that Draupadi's *akshaya-patra*, the cooking pot she is given as a divine boon and out of which she can serve food virtually without limit, is a symbol that points towards the same spiritual truth: that when we have attained to a direct connection with the Lord within, our resources—our love, wisdom, and compassion—become boundless. We *become* channels of the divine love. As Teresa herself put it,


Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
with compassion on this world.

Mirror of Eternity

Few religious symbols, finally, are more consistently seen as feminine than the mirror, and no one has employed it with more charm and force than Saint Clare of Assisi did in a letter to one of her dearest disciples, Saint Agnes of Hungary (1205–82).

'Place your mind before the mirror of eternity,' she wrote. 'Place your soul in the brightness of His glory ... and transform yourself utterly through contemplation into the image of His divinity.'

To speak of Jesus the Christ as a mirror is to suggest that when we gaze long and hard at his life and teachings, we can also see ourselves, however faint and elusive the image might be. At the heart of this powerful teaching is the understanding that if we return our gaze to that mirror day after day, year after year, we start to see ourselves *in* Christ, and Christ in us, with ever increasing clarity. Our behaviour changes accordingly, at last the two images become one, and we ourselves become, once again, the face of divine love in this world.

The children of Kerala are blessed from their earliest years with a remarkably similar teaching. Vishu is the Kerala New Year. It falls in April most years—here in California we celebrate it when the swans are nesting and the lilac and wisteria are coming into bloom. On the eve of Vishu, after the children are tucked in bed, their mothers construct a beautiful arrangement of auspicious items that includes flowers, gold coins, raw rice, a lamp, and right at the centre, a mirror. In the morning each child is led blindfolded to the table and told to repeat his or her mantra. 'Now open your eyes,' her mother says, 'and you will see the Lord!' And of course they do. Little Sita looks into the depths of the mirror and sees ... *Sita*. Her brother Rama looks and sees *Rama*; they see themselves, but they see God *in* themselves as well. And if in the mirror they should catch a glimpse of their mother's loving gaze, they see the Mother as well. 

References

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Sri Ramakrishna's Parables for Soft Skills Development

Dr Sumita Roy

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S INJUNCTION 'God-realization is the only goal of human existence', when combined with his declaration '*yata mat, tata path*; as many opinions, so many paths', gives rise to a map of total human development achievable in innumerable ways through the combination of the external and internal realms of human experience. Read from this point of view, the parables the Master uses to communicate his message become the basis for acquiring not only knowledge about the process of God-realization, but also for inculcating the skills that make this knowledge a concrete, pragmatic, and achievable goal. It is not enough to know that the aim of human birth is to realize God; it is necessary to actualize this knowledge so that we move towards realizing what, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is eminently realizable.

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The Efficacy of Skills

In an age where maladjusted, imbalanced, and mismanaged existence is the norm, the parables of Sri Ramakrishna give specific and measurable tools to strive for total human development, which in today's popular parlance is known as personality development. To quote Swami Ishatmananda: "Thousands and thousands of years earlier the quest for complete personality began and that is seen fully manifested in the personality of Sri Ramakrishna."¹

Obviously, a person who has arrived at the summit of the quest is the most qualified to show the way to all others who want to tread the same path. Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly warned that mere theory is not worth much. These 'hard skills' or core knowledge bases need to be supplemented with 'soft skills' to put the former into perspective. To illustrate this, his story of the pundit in the boat can be narrated:

Once several men were crossing the Ganges in a boat. One of them, a pandit, was making a great display of his erudition, saying that he had studied various books—the Vedas, the Vedanta, and the six systems of philosophy. He asked a fellow passenger, 'Do you know the Vedanta?' 'No, revered sir.' 'The Samkhya and the Patanjala?' 'No, revered sir.' 'Have you read no philosophy whatever?' 'No, revered sir.' The pandit was talking in this vain way and the passenger sitting in silence when a great storm arose and the boat was about to sink. The passenger said to the pandit, 'Sir, can you swim?' 'No,' replied the pandit. The passenger said, 'I don't know Samkhya or Patanjala, but I can swim.'²

The pundit was well-versed in the Vedas, Vedanta, and the six systems of philosophy; but these could not save him in the 'storm'. The passenger in the boat had the contextual skill required to save himself. In the turbulent worldly storm what has more contextual validity is the skill of swimming and not the knowledge of philosophy. Of course, the implication is evident: it would be great if the pundit's erudition was combined with an ability to swim; but in the absence of one of the two, the latter is preferable to the former.

A few more illustrations will now be taken up to show how Sri Ramakrishna's parables can be read as an entire course in skills training, which helps develop that total human personality for undertaking the task of God-realization—not only a spiritual necessity, but possibly the only way to bring some semblance of order into today's chaotic medley that passes for existence.

Goal Setting

Goals are important for regulating the course of life. In fact, the Master's urging towards God-realization is nothing other than a goal he wants every one of his followers to reach. As Swami

Amartyananda says: 'The very definition of the word goal means the end of the race; there is no need to run further. A bit of introspection will reveal that behind all our impulses, all our hunger and lust for material objects lies the one, true desire for completeness—in other words satisfaction, fulfilment or peace.'³ To set and actualize a goal skills may be necessary, but what is more important is the kind of goal to be set and the means employed to reach the end. Here Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the two friends is worth narrating:

Once two friends were going along the street when they saw some people listening to a reading of the Bhagavata. 'Come, friend,' said the one to the other, 'let us hear the sacred book.' So saying he went in and sat down. The second man peeped in and went away. He entered a house of ill fame. But very soon he felt disgusted with the place. 'Shame on me!' he said to himself. 'My friend has been listening to the sacred word of Hari; and see where I am!' But the friend who had been listening to the Bhagavata also became disgusted. 'What a fool I am!' he said. 'I have been listening to this fellow's blah-blah, and my friend is having a grand time.' In course of time they both died. The messenger of death came for the soul of one who had listened to the Bhagavata and dragged it off to hell. The messenger of God came for the soul of the one who had been to the house of prostitution and led it up to heaven.'⁴

The goal set by the first friend did not benefit him ultimately, because he could not stay the course. And the impulse to pursue pleasure did not harm the second friend, because this very impulse became for him the stepping stone to a positive transformation through the realization of his mistake. In the final analysis the latter was a better goal set than the one of sitting at the recital of the sacred text to finally become 'disgusted'.

Motivation

In a volume entitled *Effective Motivation*, John Adair defines motivation as 'something that *moves you to action* ... something within you ... at work, impelling or driving you forward.'⁵ This is self-motivation. He also speaks of motivating others, which is another aspect of motivation: 'To motivate ... another person ... means essentially that you provide *a person with a motive or incentive to do something or other*. By so doing you are *initiating* their action or behavior' (9–10).

In the course of his discussions on what motivates people, Adair quotes Goethe: 'If you treat people as they are, they will stay as they are. But if you treat them as they ought to be, they will become bigger and better persons' (93).

This is similar to what the priest is able to do to the milkmaid in Sri Ramakrishna's parable, which can be cited as having both instances of positive motivation and negative self-motivation:

A milk-maid used to supply milk to a brahmana priest living on the other side of a river. Owing to the irregularities of the boat service, she could not supply him milk punctually every day. Once, being rebuked for her going late, the poor woman said, 'What can I do? I start early from my house, but have to wait for a long time at the river bank for the boatman and the passengers.' The priest said, 'Woman! They cross the ocean of life by uttering the name of God, and can't you cross this little river?' The simple-hearted woman became very glad at heart on learning this easy means of crossing the river. From the next day the milk was being supplied early in the morning. One day the priest said to the woman, 'How is it that you are no longer late nowadays?' She said, 'I cross the river by uttering the name of the Lord as you told me to do, and don't stand now in need of a boatman.' The priest could not believe this and said,

'Can you show me how you cross the river?' The woman took him with her and began to walk over the water. Looking behind, the woman saw the priest in a sad plight and said, 'How is it, sir, that you are uttering the name of God with your mouth, but at the same time with your hands you are trying to keep your cloth untouched by water? You do not fully rely on Him.'⁶

The priest's words of motivation worked wonders for the milkmaid, but his lack of faith in his own words caused his 'sad plight'. Sri Ramakrishna also considers that faith is a highly motivating factor, and this is best illustrated by the manner in which the innocent milkmaid believes in and acts upon the words of the priest.

Emotional Intelligence

In his groundbreaking bestseller called *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman cites 'reports of the disintegration of civility and safety, an onslaught of mean-spirited impulse running amok. ... The news simply reflects back to us on a larger scale a creeping sense of emotions out of control in our own lives and in those of the people around us.'⁷ He begins the volume by quoting Aristotle's words: 'Anyone can be angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy' (ix). In a story of Sri Ramakrishna about a snake who forgot to hiss, this parameter of emotional intelligence seems to find a meaningful validation:

Some cowherd boys used to tend their cows in a meadow where a terrible poisonous snake lived. Everyone was on the alert for fear of it. One day a brahmachari was going along the meadow. The boys ran to him and said: 'Revered sir, please don't go that way. A venomous snake lives over there.' 'What of it, my good children?' said the brahmachari. 'I am not afraid of the snake. I know some mantras.' So saying, he continued

on his way along the meadow. But the cowherd boys, being afraid, did not accompany him. In the meantime the snake moved swiftly towards him with upraised hood. As soon as it came near, he recited a mantra, and the snake lay at his feet like an earthworm. The brahmachari said: 'Look here. Why do you go about doing harm? Come, I will give you a holy word. By repeating it you will learn to love God. Ultimately you will realize Him and also get rid of your violent nature.' Saying this, he taught the snake a holy word and initiated it into spiritual life. The snake bowed before the teacher and said, 'Revered sir, how shall I practise spiritual discipline?' 'Repeat this sacred word,' said the teacher, 'and do no harm to anybody.' As he was about to depart, the brahmachari said, 'I shall see you again.'

Some days passed and the cowherd boys noticed that the snake would not bite. They threw stones at it. Still it showed no anger; it behaved as if it were an earthworm. One day one of the boys came close to it, caught it by the tail, and whirling it round and round, dashed it again and again on the ground and threw it away. The snake vomited blood and became unconscious. It was stunned. It could not move. So, thinking it dead, the boys went their way.

Late at night the snake regained consciousness. Slowly and with great difficulty it dragged itself into its hole; its bones were broken and it could scarcely move. Many days passed. The snake became a mere skeleton covered with skin. Now and then, at night, it would come out in search of food. For fear of the boys it would not leave its hole during the day-time. Since receiving the sacred word from the teacher, it had given up doing harm to others. It maintained its life on dirt, leaves, or the fruit that dropped from trees.

About a year later the brahmachari came that way again and asked after the snake. The cowherd boys told him that it was dead. But he couldn't believe them. He knew that the snake

would not die before attaining the fruit of the holy word with which it had been initiated. He found his way to the place and, searching here and there, called it by the name he had given it. Hearing the Guru's voice, it came out of its hole and bowed before him with great reverence. 'How are you?' asked the brahmachari. 'I am well, sir,' replied the snake. 'But,' the teacher asked, 'why are you so thin?' The snake replied: 'Revered sir, you ordered me not to harm anybody. So I have been living only on leaves and fruit. Perhaps that has made me thinner.'

The snake had developed the quality of *satva*; it could not be angry with anyone. It had totally forgotten that the cowherd boys had almost killed it.

The brahmachari said: 'It can't be mere want of food that has reduced you to this state. There must be some other reason. Think a little.' Then the snake remembered that the boys had dashed it against the ground. It said: 'Yes, revered sir, now I remember. The boys one day dashed me violently against the ground. They are ignorant, after all. They didn't realize what a great change had come over my mind. How could they know I wouldn't bite or harm anyone?' The brahmachari exclaimed: 'What a shame! You are such a fool! You don't know how to protect yourself. I asked you not to bite, but I didn't forbid you to hiss. Why didn't you scare them away by hissing?'⁸


The mantra that the guru gives needs to be exercised in conjunction with emotional intelligence. As Goleman suggests: 'Our passions, when well exercised, have wisdom; they guide our thinking, our values, our survival. But they can easily go awry.'⁹ This was the case of the snake-turned-earthworm of the story. Once the guru assures him that there is no harm in hissing as an act of self-preservation, the emotional balance is restored. What is needed is to know the 'right' amount of emotion a context demands—not expend too less or too much, just what is adequate.

Mind Management

Both the Master and the Holy Mother have repeatedly stressed that the mind is everything: it can make or mar our lives depending on how we handle it. Unlike the popular issue of mind mapping, which has now become very popular as a pedagogic tool, mind management helps observe one's own mind and increase its capacity for positive transformation—a holistic health perspective. Otherwise, the mind itself becomes our worst enemy. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the traveller who gets eaten by a tiger can be cited here:

A certain traveller came to a large plain in the course of his travels. As he had been walking in the sun for many hours, he was thoroughly exhausted and heavily perspiring; so he sat down in the shade of a tree to rest a little. Presently he began to think what a comfort it would be if he could but get a soft bed there to sleep on. He was not aware that he was sitting under the celestial tree. As soon as the above thought rose in his mind, he found a nice bed by his side. He felt much astonished, but all the same stretched himself on it. Now he thought to himself how pleasant it would be were a young damsel to come there and gently stroke his legs. No sooner did the thought arise in his mind than he found a young damsel sitting at his feet and stroking his legs. The traveller felt supremely happy. Presently he felt hungry and thought: 'I have got whatever I have wished for; could I not then get some food?' Instantly he found various kinds of delicious food spread before him. He at once fell to eating, and having helped himself to his heart's content, stretched himself again on his bed. He now began to revolve in his mind the events of the day. While thus occupied, he thought, 'If a tiger should attack me all of a sudden!' In an instant a large tiger jumped on him and broke his neck and began to drink his blood. In this way the traveller lost his life.¹⁰

As is evident, thought power is immense. By willing the mind in a particular direction the seemingly impossible becomes possible. The only thing to be cautious about is what we are directing our thoughts towards. Here thought power and positive attitude complement each other and lead to the management of the mind—the most crucial tool for all human achievement.

Though these are only a few examples, one can easily conclude that almost all the parables that dot the discourses of the Master have inherent skills, which when learnt and properly practised make for a meaningful, fulfilling life. They impart balance and maturity of outlook. They bring to the forefront of our experience those essential soft skills that are invaluable if we want to make use of the inbuilt hardware in the supercomputer of our brain. This is just another way of reading the parables—a very urgent and efficacious way of tracing skills leading to God-realization. 

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REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA,
publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications



Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited

Swami Tyagananda and
Pravrajika Vrajaprana

Motilal Banarsidass, 41 UA Bungal-
low Road, Jawahar Nagar, Delhi
110 007. Website: www.mlb.com.
2010. xxii + 410. ₹ 995.

What are the roots that clutch,
what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter,
the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.

—T S Eliot, *The Waste Land*

It was in a tiny advertisement in *Parabola* that I first noticed *Kali's Child*. The 'mystico-erotic' subtitle sounded familiar. Our university librarian could have discarded the torn and tattered copy of Wendy Doniger's early work *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*. That he chose to pass it on to me appeared both mystical and tantalizing. In retrospect, it seems to have been a teleological hint: 'Be prepared for stronger doses of the theme, this time directed exclusively at your dear and real Ramakrishna!' My hunch was confirmed when I received a copy of *Kali's Child* from friends in the US.

Over the years almost all the studies explored by the two distinguished authors of *Interpreting Ramakrishna* have reached me. Among the recent ones is David Gordon White's study of *Yogini Hridaya* [*Kaulajnananirṇaya*], published—naturally, and almost inevitably—from the University of Chicago. It is ironical that though Chicago is the city from where Swami Vivekananda declared the imperative need for respect and reverence

for the faiths of 'others', the university press of this very city keeps publishing books that are conspicuous for their intolerable insensitivity to Hindu or Indic traditions.

Meanwhile, Dr Pratap Sri-Ram Sundar, a friend in Boston, sent me a photocopy of Malcolm McLean's translation of the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita* (Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna). I was left dumbfounded when I failed to find anything new about the 'secret' passages that the author of *Kali's Child* would have us believe lie scattered in there, and which I fondly hoped to read. That the residue of a response left my mind after it survived the exposure to such studies may sound rhetorical, but I must still state my thoughts openly: These studies are indeed seething cauldrons of erotic motifs ready to implode, only to find safety valves in the authors' distorted visions of tantra that give them academic credentials and even, as happened with Jeffrey Kripal, prestigious awards. In these studies tantra is facilely equated with *vamachara*, in which everything can be made to look erotico-mystical or mystico-erotic, depending on which aspect you privilege.

I sat and wrote a hundred-page critique before stopping in my tracks. The stench stirred up by several aspects of the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' was overwhelming. The related analytical apparatus—unfailingly hegemonic—shocked me: One is supposed to take for granted that translations by 'native' scholars are a conspiracy in international 'cover-ups'; that all religious biographies—particularly those of Ramakrishna by his disciples—are nothing but hagiography and therefore hazy concoctions born of indiscriminate devotion; that since textual and sexual politics are intertwined, terms like 'woman and gold', which Sri Ramakrishna uses freely, must necessarily be sexist and so should be beaten hollow; and, above all, one should dig deep into submerged motives such as parental loss, mother fixation, and infantile erotic

longings lying locked up in the unconscious as hetero- or homo-phobias. It is a minor miracle that I taught Freud for two decades without becoming a 'nut'.

My critique landed in the dustbin. America is certainly better positioned in terms of 'woman and gold'. If, as the authors of *Interpreting Ramakrishna* say, Bengali intellectuals are of no great significance to Western scholars (74), I stand nowhere. In my own mother tongue, of course, there is enough subversion of even the Indian epics. It has, for instance, been said that the Ramayana is rank bawdry, *ranku*, and the Mahabharata a blatant fabrication, *bonku*.

I may sound emotional. However, I found unexpected support in Martha C Nussbaum, who wrote: 'It might seem very strange that emotions are forms of judgment ... judgments in which people acknowledge great importance, for their own flourishing, of things they do not fully control—and acknowledge their neediness before the world and its events.' (*Upheaval of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*; Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.22 and 90). But in her recent book *The Clash Within*, Nussbaum also has a clear, albeit muted, appreciation for *Kali's Child* as an outstanding contribution in uncovering the mystico-erotic link. What is of greater interest to me, though, is something different. I venture to think that unless Western scholars learn to put their views forward gracefully—with true concern and sensitivity for cultural specifics—'insiders' will resort to other methods forcefully.

It is against this background that *Interpreting Ramakrishna* appears both graceful in its attitude and forceful in its arguments. It is devoid of rhetoric or tricky play on words. If I felt I was being drowned in the spate of 'tantric' studies on Ramakrishna, I found myself surfacing through the authors' vibrant insights and comprehensive and balanced approach that takes in its stride both the 'intimate enemy' and the sympathizer outside. The authors neither dismiss nor elevate any approach. I would describe their 'method' as embodying the true Paramahansa way: separate the nourishing milk from the apparently muddy waters, like the celestial swan.

One can put it in another way: Accept argu-

ments with willing and fruitful suspension of all suspicion, and yet offer a critique that fulfils rather than destroys any argument, however weird or wild it may appear to be. Above everything else, the authors have commendably balanced their commitment to the institutional norms of the Ramakrishna Order, to which they belong, while retaining their autonomy as disinterested dispassionate researchers. The one does not tame or eliminate the other. This is quite a tightrope walk. The crucial insight is the following: 'Interpretations of Ramakrishna have frequently provided more insight into the interpreters and their cultural presuppositions than into Ramakrishna himself' (92). I would replace 'frequently' with 'almost always'.

The tightly woven plan and structure of the book—crafted over long years of study and research—is a model of intricate interrelatedness. There are six chapters. We begin with a brief history of Ramakrishna scholarship, approach *Kali's Child* next, and are then treated to a history of the debate regarding especially the mystico-erotic nexus. This is seen as being naturally linked to interpreting in cross-cultural contexts and is followed by the most crucial aspect of the research: documentation and translation issues. This chapter, I felt, ought to have been more suggestive.

The results are there for any reader to see. Of great interest is the frankness and scrupulous honesty of scholarship. One finds refreshingly candid reassessments of the early biographers of Ramakrishna, notably Max Müller and Romain Rolland. While Max Müller was 'poised between patronizing devaluation or outright dismissal', Rolland had his own agenda: He saw 'Ramakrishna as India's restorative to a European dystopia', and settled 'into a European Romantic fantasy which succeeded in obscuring Ramakrishna as thoroughly as any other Orientalist. Rolland's was not Ramakrishna; it was Europe' (31–2).

But the most fascinating are views the authors present about Christopher Isherwood. Here is a typical case of balancing institutional norms with individual autonomy. When Swami Vidyatmananda—one of the most balanced writers on Ramakrishna Vedanta—felt that Isherwood's

biography of Ramakrishna was not as good as expected, Isherwood agreed and said, 'I could probably give a much more vivid impression of Ramakrishna when talking to a sympathetic stranger in a bar, after several drinks' (40). This is certainly playful and frank; but one wonders that while creativity can help write a brilliantly engaging book on Ramakrishna, the core of Ramakrishna's life and message may not have effectively touched such writers. One may juxtapose Frank Kermode's review of Isherwood's book with the above statement by Isherwood; Kermode found the book lacking in 'all irony, all criticism'; Isherwood was clearly not directly engaging and beguiling the reader (43-4).

Isherwood's remarks about writing a better book and his critics' demand for beguiling the reader are, in fact, the basic planks of 'tantric' studies on Ramakrishna. They assume different forms, but these 'scholars', it seems to me, are looking only for grafting 'beguiling' erotic items on to the Ramakrishna narrative. In short, there seems to be an imperative urge for sexual readings. And in this regard, the East-West divide is conspicuously vanishing.

This trend is amply evident in the enormous material culled, described, and analysed—often too elaborately for my squeamish taste—by the authors of this book. From Jeffrey Masson, Walter Neevel, and Carl Olson, through T G Vaidyanathan, Sudhir Kakar, and others, to Kripal and beyond, we have citations that are so graphic and discussed in so forthright a manner that I found myself a bit puzzled: for a book of this nature, to make a point, is it necessary to lay before the readers such threadbare details?

This is not a matter of moral policing. It seems to me a problem of sensitivity. One can be sensitive without being prudish or doctrinaire. This is evident in the incredible patience and balance that have gone into the making of this book in general and the issues of documentation and translation in particular. As irrefutably demonstrated, *Kali's Child* is built on fabricated major premises and highly distorted translations that claim to recover the untranslatable nuances of Bengali texts. 'With manufactured unease', say the authors, Kripal invokes 'the specter of scandal' about Ramakrishna

and the blatant concoctions about his behaviour as being 'troubling' and 'troubled'. Parents, according to the hyperactive hunches of Kripal, were 'shocked by [Ramakrishna's] eroticized language' (279). Even the Master's parents are not exempt from Kripal's weirdly fertile fancies: Ramakrishna's mother, for instance, had 'nocturnal dreams' which—one can make an easy guess by now—are 'erotic encounters'.

Another of Kripal's favourite ploys is 'the universalizing of one element ... and creating from it a general statement about Ramakrishna's behavior and the reaction it received ... a common thread which can be found throughout the course of *Kali's Child*' (280). Every gesture and act of Ramakrishna is trivialized through idiosyncratic translations from Bengali texts. The whole process is meticulously unravelled by the two authors in the chapter on documentation and translation. The fabrications ought to have been, I feel, a shameful embarrassment even to an American sophomore. In fact, when I read *Kali's Child*, I got the eerie impression of it being the script of a cheap American flick.

It is in this chapter on documentation and translation treasons that the book sets particularly high standards of accuracy and accountability, which should mark any cross-cultural study.

But, in spite of all this effort, will the tantric leopards change their spots? I doubt it. 'The philosophical hegemony of the Western world'—these are Richard King's words—cannot be easily unsettled. The authors are aware of this when they write: 'As recent Western cultural history has taken its bends and curves over the past century, Ramakrishna studies has been pulled along on a parallel journey, driven as it were, by changing intellectual paradigms which reflected Europe's and North America's changing values and cultural assumptions. Yet studies on Ramakrishna, at least those done in the West to this date, have not incorporated the enormous religious, philosophical or cultural background found in Ramakrishna's own tradition' (356).

It is therefore not surprising that even *Interpreting Ramakrishna* had to make *Kali's Child* a catalyst to break new ground. All the same, it is a remarkable example of incredible inwardness with

the various aspects of Ramakrishna as a global phenomenon. The authors blend this deep awareness with the rigorous—and often uncomfortably rigid—Western academic agenda on research projects. The attitude is remarkably humane and the unified sensibility of the authors shows no cracks. As a former editor of *Vedanta Kesari*, Tyagananda brings his editorial expertise, and Vrajaprana, if I infer correctly from her writings, her transparent clarity and forthrightness to the project.

Now what should beckon them is precisely what they have suggested. Focus on the philosophical and hermeneutical heritage of Indic traditions—so gloriously exemplified in the Ramakrishna-Vedanta texts. They should work this out not as an alternative frame but as an indispensable integral component of global cultural and religious traditions. Only then can the hegemonic milieu that exists today be neutralized.

If *Kali's Child* represents the centrality of Western academic hegemony, *Interpreting Ramakrishna* jolts that centrality. If *Kali's Child* is being looked upon, as the authors say, 'as an axial work for future Ramakrishna scholarship and has already been used as such', *Interpreting Ramakrishna* offers, in revisiting *Kali's Child*, a comprehensively corrective mini-encyclopaedia, a companion to the whole range of 'tantric' studies in general. Above all, free from that dull aesthetic pain inflicted by most research studies, *Interpreting Ramakrishna* can be enjoyed as an unstoppable narrative with the occasional exquisite but bitingly funny turn of phrase and with exciting little-known facts about well-known people, including some very distinguished swamis of the Ramakrishna Order.

In his foreword, Huston Smith commends 'the authors of this book for their self-respect in standing up to *Kali's Child* wisely and with dignity'. May I add that in this they have stood up for all admirers and devotees of this unique phenomenon known as Ramakrishna. The land laid waste has been truly reclaimed for truthful cultivation.

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The Doctrine of Bhakti in Vāṭlabha Vedānta

K Narain

Udayana Kumar Srivastava for Indological Research Centre, PB 35, Sukulpura, PO Mahmoorganj, Varanasi 221 010. E-mail: ircvns@rediffmail.com. 2009. 128 pp. ₹ 295.

Vallabhacharya, of the fifteenth century CE, was born in a Telugu brahmana family. His advent was the need of the hour, when the Mohammedan hordes were destroying Hindu temples and Buddhist viharas and putting to the sword Hindus and Buddhists who were not willing to be converted to Islam. The hapless people needed something that would give an immediate assurance of safety. Vallabha was able to help them by crystallizing the path of bhakti as image-worship in an admirable manner. He travelled throughout India and had many memorable experiences. Towards the end of his life, he took sannyyasa and entered *jala-samadhi* in the Ganga at Varanasi. His works numbering twelve include *Tattvartha Dipa Nibhandha* and *Subhodhini*. The very popular 'Madhurashtakam' is Vallabhacharya's gift to the Krishna/Vaishanava school of bhakti.

Dr K Narain's subject is Vallabhacharya's philosophy known as Brahmapada—Suddha-dvaita—which sees the ultimate Reality as having innumerable attributes like Consciousness and Bliss. There is no place here for 'the dubious and inexplicable (*anirvacaniya*) principle of *Māyā*' (22).

Brahman, which is everything, has attributes—including what seems contradictory—too: 'Like Rāmānuja, Madhva and other Vaiṣṇavites he is vehemently opposed to any conception of Brahman which considers It as indeterminate and bereft of attributes. To him, Brahman is essentially qualified by attributes, is perfect and is unlimited by time and space. Not only is Brahman the substrate of qualities, He is also the ground and substratum of contradictory qualities as demonstrated by innumerable *śrutis*' (23).

Moksha is the ideal cherished by human beings, but Vallabha does not favour it as the summum bonum of life. Experiencing the Divine on earth is the real Ananda for which we should strive for:

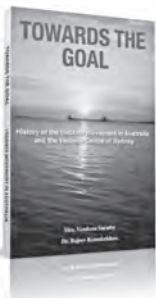
‘To him [Vallabha], the Supreme Experience of Illimitable Bliss consists only in the direct knowledge and immediate experience of Puruṣottama and participation in His Eternal Sport’ (32). Discussing in detail the ‘means’ of attaining deliverance, Dr Narain points out that more than instruments like karma and jnana, it is devotion that marks the sure unfailing path towards deliverance in Vallabha’s philosophy. Devotion to Sri Krishna forms the vital springs of this philosophy—it is to live constantly in the consciousness of Sri Krishna.

‘The real nature and character of “service” to Lord Kṛṣṇa is always mental; it is only for its achievement that physical and monetary service has to be resorted to during the preliminary stage leading to purified mental state of unhampered loving contemplation of the Divine Person, called *Bhakti*, which ultimately leads to the true knowledge of Puruṣottama’s nature (*svarūpa*) and immortality and freedom of man’ (63).

Dr Narain then takes us to the concluding movement of his text, detailing various levels of devotion according to Vallabha as well as the theory and practice for each level. In this connection the games of Sri Krishna in Vrindavan are relevant to the modern man also—though they belong to the distant past, they continue to be enacted in the devotee’s heart. The omnipotent and omnipresent Krishna continues to bless such devotees externally and internally, drawing them away from the world and its objects. The Delight of Existence alone becomes the Reality. Avoiding academic dryness, *The Doctrine of Bhakti in Vallabha Vedānta* is an erudite book of philosophy to understand a major pathway to God opened by the Bhakti movement.

Prema Nandakumar

Researcher and Literary Critic
Srirangam



Towards The Goal

Mrs Vandana Sarathy and
Dr Rajeev Ramakrishna

Chitkala Centre, 12 A Fletcher Avenue, Blackehurst, NSW 2221, Australia. 2009. vi + 123 pp. Australian Dollars 10.

Swami Vivekananda wanted the message of Vedanta to gradually percolate global consciousness. This book is an account of the Vedanta movement in Australia. Mrs Elsie Picket did the pioneering Vedanta work and later Swami Ranganathananda was instrumental in consolidating the subsequent opening of a centre of the Ramakrishna Mission in Sydney in 2000.

The book starts with brief introductions to Vedanta, Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, and traces the origin of the Ramakrishna movement. The parents of the authors, Dr and Mrs Ramakrishna were key figures in the spread of the message of Vedanta in Australia. They hosted the swamis frequently visiting the continent before the opening of a centre of the Order.

The book, after describing the development of the Vedanta movement in Australia, ends with a hopeful note for its future. The appendices contain brief biographical sketches of Swami Ranganathananda, Swami Damodarananda, Swami Sridharananda—present head of the Vedanta centre in Sydney—Mrs Vilma Spencer, Dr B Ramakrishna, and Mrs Kanaka Ramakrishna. Containing valuable photographs, this is an engaging historical account for admirers of the Vedanta movement. The words of H W Longfellow at the end of the book, reflect the tempo of the movement: ‘Still achieving, still pursuing’.

Swami Narasimhananda

Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata

BOOKS RECEIVED



Conversations between God and Man

G Venkataraman

Sri Sathya Sai Sadhana Trust, Prashanti Nilayam, Anantapur 515 134. Website: www.srisathyasai.org.in. 2009. xii + 244 pp. ₹ 60.

‘The essence of the Gita as needed for modern times’ by a physicist deeply interested in spiritual verities.

REPORTS

New Sub-centre

Shyampukur Bati, where Sri Ramakrishna stayed for seventy days before moving to Cossipore garden-house, has been taken over by the Ramakrishna Math, Belur, and made a sub-centre of the **Ramakrishna Math (Balaram Mandir), Kolkata**. A function was organized on 18 November 2010 in which Sri-mat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, gave a benedictory speech and Swami Prabhananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, addressed the gathering. Many monks and devotees attended the function. The address of this new sub-centre is **Ramakrishna Math (Shyampukur Bati)**, 55A, Shyampukur Street, Kolkata 700 004; Phone: (33) 2555 8580.

News from Branch Centres

The new office block at **Ramakrishna Sarada-shrama, Ponnampet**, was inaugurated on 15 September.

From 13 to 24 November **Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad**, organized the closing function of its centenary celebrations with a devotees' convention, a public meeting, and religious discourses.

Sri Shekhar Dutta, Governor of Chhattisgarh, inaugurated the four-day sports meet organized by **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, from 18 to 21 November. About 2,000 school children from 36 schools of Narainpur and Kanker districts participated in the meet.

On 28 November Sri Anupam Ray, Counsel-



Room where Sri Ramakrishna stayed at Shyampukur, now a shrine

lor, Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations, visited the **Vedanta Society, New York**, and released the book *Celebrating Shri Ramakrishna* by Swami Tathagatananda.

As a part of the centenary celebration of the Ramakrishna movement in Kadapa, the **Ramakrishna Mission, Kadapa**, conducted an all Andhra Pradesh written quiz contest based on the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda. In all, 79,902 students from 759 educational institutions participated.

On the initiative of the **Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore**, the crossroad nearest to the math and joining the Bull Temple Road has been named Sri Sarada Devi Raste.

Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Smriti Mandir, Khetri, conducted a child eye-care programme in which 12,000 students of 50 schools in and around Khetri underwent eye check-up. Of these, 1,191 students with refractory errors were given free glasses.

Achievements

On 14 November Bhilai Steel Plant conferred the Bhilai Mitra Puraskar on **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur**, for the centre's excellent welfare activities for the poor and backward people. The award carries a memento with citation.



Teachers and staff of Sarada Kindergarten, Singapore

The Sarada Kindergarten of the **Ramakrishna Mission, Singapore**, won the following prestigious MOE-AECES 2010 awards: (i) 'Distinction' for innovation, (ii) 'Merit' for outstanding kindergarten teacher, and (iii) 'Merit' for good practices. Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Minister of State for Education and Home Affairs, Singapore, handed over the awards on 23 November. These awards are jointly presented by MOE (Ministry of Education) and AECES (Association of Early Childhood Educators Singapore).

Relief

Winter Relief • 2,189 blankets were distributed through the following centres to needy people: **Belgharia:** 1,989; **Jalpaiguri:** 200.

Drought Relief • **Sargachhi** centre sunk 4 tube-wells (2 in Sargachhi village and 2 in Baninathpore village) to help people suffering from water scarcity.


Distress Relief • The following centres distributed various items to needy people: **Belgharia:** 1,573 saris, 157 dhotis, 374 lungis, 1,358 pants, 1,516 shirts, and 2,146 children's garments; **Cooch Behar:** 317 saris, 63 dhotis, 20 lungis, and 102 pairs of socks.

Flood Rehabilitation • **Belgaum** centre continued the construction of 213 houses for the victims of the October 2009 flood at Gokak and Sindhanur taluks in Belgaum and Raichur districts respectively. Till December the centre

had erected 130 houses up to the plinth level, 7 to the lintel level, and 59 to the roof level.

Pilgrim Service • On 17 November, the sacred Jugal Parikrama day, **Vrindaban** centre conducted a medical camp in which 200 pilgrims were provided first aid.

Free Eye Camps

Free eye camps are regularly conducted by many centres of the Ramakrishna Mission. A cumulative report is given in the table below, covering the period from 1 December 2009 to 30 November 2010. A total of 40,241 patients were treated and 6,707 free cataract surgeries were performed. 

Centre	Patients Treated	Surgeries Performed
Baranagar Math ¹	66	27
Belgaum ¹	1,351	294
Chandigarh ¹	531	44
Cherrapunjee	52	0
Chennai Math	853	72
Garbeta	1,199	188
Jamshedpur	479	152
Khetri ²	1,410	295
Limbdia	549	99
Lucknow	14,309	2,072
Madurai	194	0
Mayavati	773	104
Medinipur	627	94
Mumbai ¹	466	94
Narainpur	295	210
Porbandar ³	1,540	143
Rajkot ¹	3,890	371
Salem	4,436	91
Sargachhi	293	51
Sikra Kulingram	125	30
Silchar	2,141	410
Ulsoor ¹	4,297	1814
Vadodara	365	52
Total	40,241	6,707

¹ Includes data for November 2009

² Includes data for September 2009

³ Includes data for August and September 2009



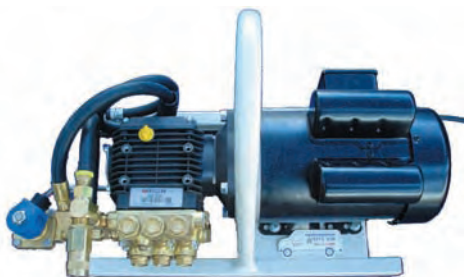
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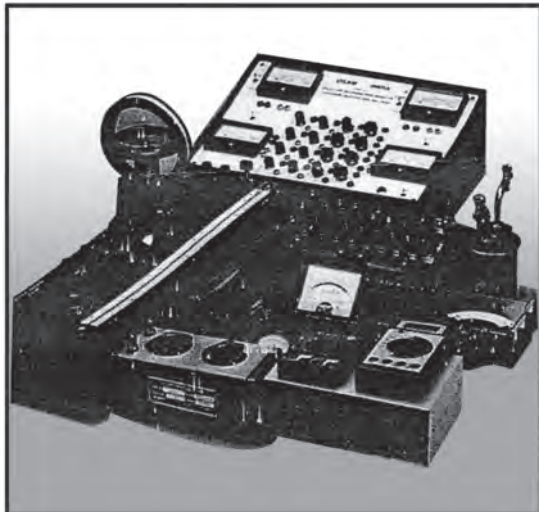
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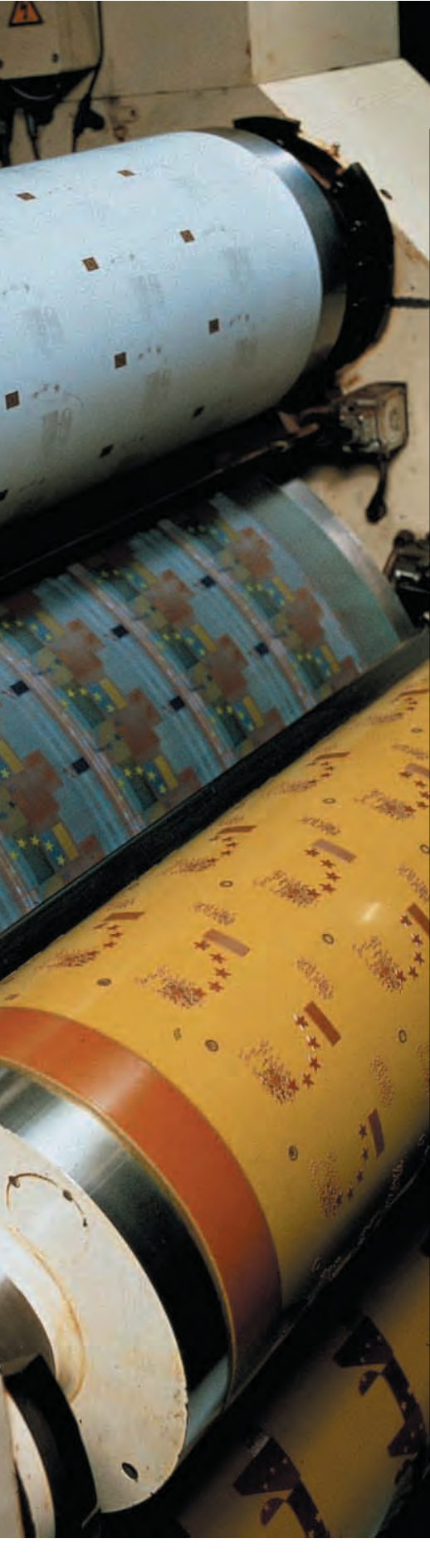
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— Swami Vivekananda

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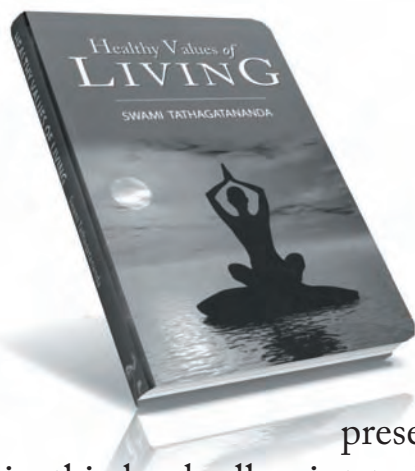


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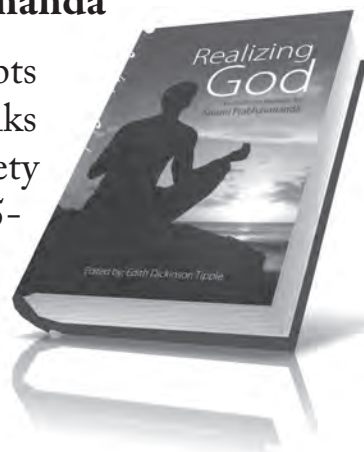
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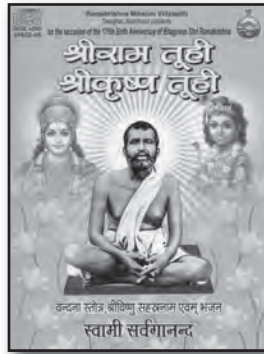
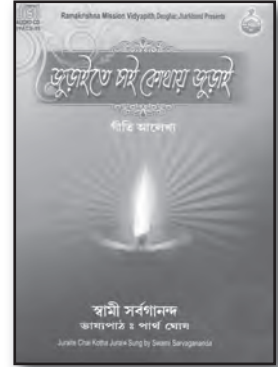
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